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ABSTRACT

Practices to maintain and enhance board-member relationships are described in this handbook. Following the preface, chapter 1 presents a historical overview to describe the problems involved in defining the proper roles for school boards and superintendents. Chapter 2 identifies current board/administrator roles and what they should be for the 1990s and beyond. The third chapter examines factors contributing to the declining tenure of superintendents. Factors of the rising tensions between boards and administrators in the areas of communication, turf, personnel decisions, and lack of training are examined in the fourth chapter. Chapter 5 looks at the external pressures that enhance those tensions. Chapters 6 and 7 provide strategies for selecting superintendents and for conducting superintendent evaluation and board self-evaluation. The eighth chapter describes how to create a relationship based on trust, with a focus on the importance of communication and the power of information. The final chapter examines some of the ways in which successful boards and administrators have created and maintained thriving relationships through developing shared decision making, dealing with conflict, participating in inservice training, changing the superintendent's role, and sharing responsibilities. An example of a school-based management program in the Cherry Creek Schools of Englewood, Colorado, and a list of related American Association of School Administrators (AASA) publications are included. (LMI)

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BUILDING BETTER BOARD—ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONS

An AASA Critical Issues Report

a critical review evaluating the significance of local school leadership and the board—superintendent relationship as the driving force behind it

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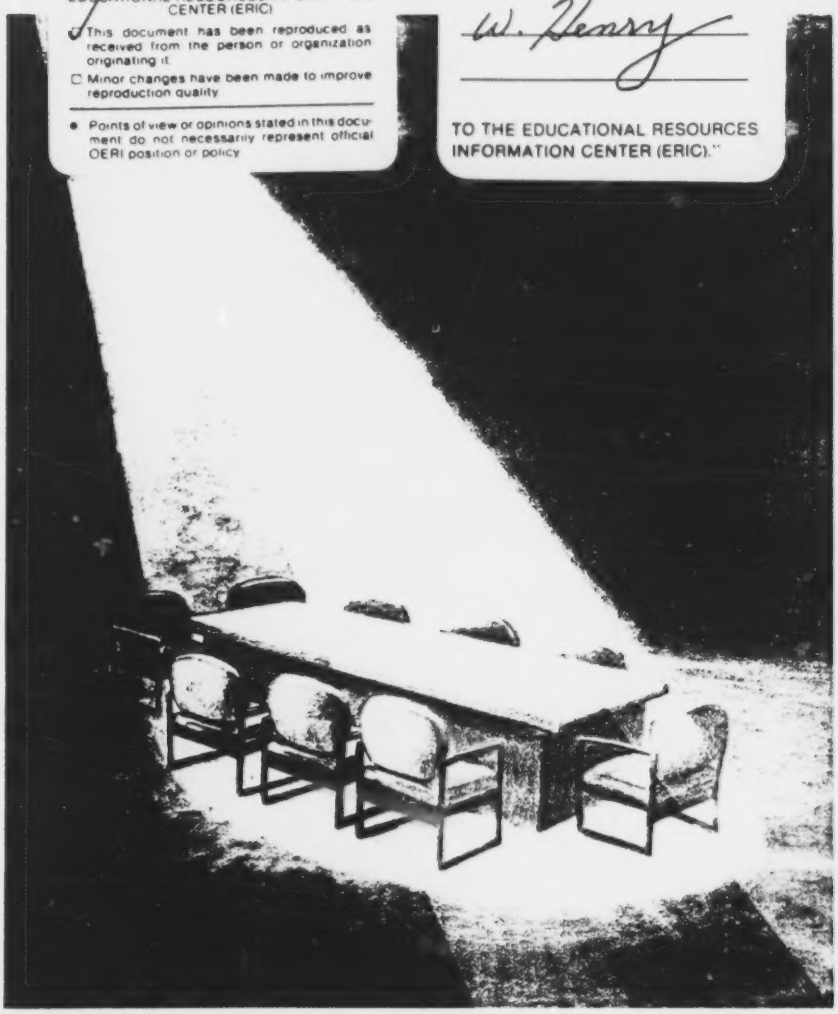

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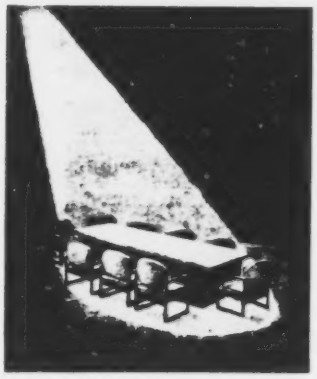
American Association of School Administrators

BUILDING BETTER BOARD—ADMINISTRATOR RELATIONS

a critical review evaluating the significance of local school leadership and the board—superintendent relationship as the driving force behind it



By Jack McCurdy

Edited by
Donald L. Hymes

The AASA Critical Issues Series

The quality of education a school district provides depends in large measure on the quality of its leadership. The relationship between the superintendent and the school board is a key factor in the leadership equation.

Local school systems are facing unprecedented pressures in the 1990s, due primarily to shrinking finances, greater public and governmental expectations, and changing student populations. And while the relationships between boards and superintendents remain solid in a majority of cases, there is evidence that these pressures are creating new tensions that could cripple a school district if allowed to grow.

How can these tensions be diminished, or at least redirected toward improving the educational system? How can the delicate balance between the roles of the board and the superintendent be maintained? This Critical Issues Report attempts to answer those questions by reviewing the problems and proposed solutions, including ways of ensuring strong relationships through effective selection and evaluation procedures.

This report was written by Jack McCurdy, a free lance education writer living in Morro Bay, California, and edited by Donald L. Hymes, editor/manager of the Critical Issues Series. Special thanks go to Leslie Eckard and Katie Ross of the AASA staff for their editing assistance.

Special appreciation also goes to the administrators and school board presidents who responded to the AASA survey conducted for this report, and to the dozens of superintendents, board members, college professors, and consultants who generously donated their time to be interviewed, and whose contributions comprise the bulk of this book.

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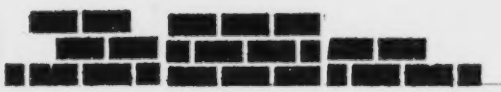


PREFACE

Board-Superintendent Relations:

A Key to School Success

The importance of local school leadership in creating successful schools cannot be overstated. As long ago as 1958, political scientist Neal Gross called for more research into the roles of boards and superintendents because their relationship "is at the heart of any educational problem and its solution."

Over the past several decades, however, educational research has focused more on the school curriculum, the classroom, students, teachers, social influences on achievement, and a host of other topics to explore ways of improving school effectiveness. School boards and superintendents were, for the most part, forgotten.

Now, as pressures mount to accomplish major school reform and restructuring, policy makers and researchers are once again examining the joint role of boards and superintendents as a key to reenergizing public education. In just a few years, one observer remarked, school governance has gone from being a non-issue to a top item on the national reform agenda.

In some quarters, there is a sense of rediscovery of the significance of local school leadership and the board-superintendent relationship as the driving force behind it. In its 1986 report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership," the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) declared that "the quality of this relationship affects the overall effectiveness of a district's schools."

Linkages crucial

The vast majority of boards and superintendents enjoy healthy, cooperative relationships, according to the IEL report and other studies, but in many cases those linkages must be strengthened because they are so crucial. "Unsatisfactory relationships, either between a board and its superintendent or among board members themselves, destroy a sense of mission for the schools," the IEL report said. Dissonance "affects the morale and professionalism of those who staff the schools and causes lack of confidence in educational leadership in the community," and ultimately "it limits the education of children."

In part, the renewed focus on the dynamics of local school leadership was prompted by the high-profile departures of some big-city superintendents in recent years. Their short tenures, while not representative of the national trend, did raise questions about the overall state of board-superintendent relationships and how they could be fortified where necessary. There is widespread concern in public education that a high turnover rate of superintendents and/or board members causes instability that can, and often does, impede the progress of a district's schools and its students.

The importance of stability

As in most large enterprises, fundamental change in education requires careful planning, long-term commitment, and time. Superintendent Thomas Payzant of the San Diego City Schools noted, "My sense is that if there is stability and continuity, you have a better chance to institutionalize change," he said.

Consultant Jim Huge agrees. He believes that turnover in school district leadership "causes people not to take risks" at a time when risk-taking may be essential to structural improvement. Some educators, for example, tend to take safe actions out of "fear that I can't accomplish anything" in a climate of instability.

It is impossible to have long-range goals, planning, and "visionary leadership" in such a climate, said Lee Etta Powell, professor of educational leadership at George Washington University. When superintendents are being repeatedly shuffled, the teachers, principals, parents, and even students go into a holding pattern, waiting for signs of permanency. "They won't act—they just wait," she said, and "you often hear, 'This too shall pass.'"

Professor Robert Crowson of the University of Illinois at Chicago said in districts with a high turnover in superintendents "there is a real tendency to batten down the hatches and to protect the organization from the new superintendent because of the feeling that he will only be there a short time." In such districts, he added, people frequently say, "I've seen them come, I've seen them go, and I'm still doing the same thing."

Children suffer

"Who suffers?" asked a superintendent at a 1991 conference of urban superintendents held by the U. S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement. "The kids, because they don't have continuity. They don't have stability in terms of leadership, and programs keep changing. It's a revolving door not only with people but with programs. Strategic plans get into practice and then they get changed."

Milt Goldberg, director of the Office of Research in the U.S. Department of Education, said stability in the superintendency is crucial because "the way the superintendent expresses his vision of the system and the way he works to share that vision with the community, students, and parents is as important as any factor in the success of schools." And, he emphasized, "it takes time to do that.

This is why strong, collaborative relationships between school boards and superintendents are so vital, and why this Critical Issues Report is so timely. There are inherent tensions between boards and superintendents, as this report will show, but there are also many sound and effective practices employed by thousands of successful boards and superintendents to maintain and enhance their relationships.

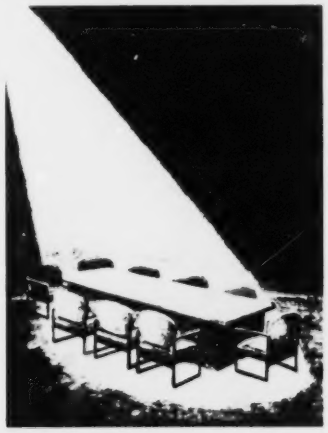
This report will delve into those productive practices in the hope that they will help school leaders build stronger relationships for the ultimate benefit of the students and the communities they serve.

CHAPTER ONE

The 'Proper' Roles of School Boards and Superintendents:

Searching the Past for Clues

Before getting into the problems that some school boards and superintendents encounter and exploring ways to build stronger relationships, we should decide what their proper roles should be in achieving the most effective operation of school districts. Why? Because confusion over those roles seems to be at the core of most conflicts that arise between boards and superintendents.



Superintendents and board members surveyed for this Critical Issues Report agreed overwhelmingly that their relationships were in very good shape. But a lack of clarity in roles poses potential problems and demands constant attention to avoid misunderstandings and conflict.

For example, 92 percent of the superintendents said conflicts between superintendents and boards arise from confusion over proper roles, and only 8 percent disagreed with that statement. Board members were not asked the exact survey question but indicated agreement in a variety of other ways.

Describing their relationships with boards, 62 percent of the superintendents participating in the survey said they were excellent, 29 percent said they were good, 7 percent said fair and 2 percent said poor. Among board presidents, 61 percent rated their relationships as excellent, 28 percent said good, 9 percent said fair and 2 percent said poor. On this point, superintendents and boards see eye to eye, according to the survey results.

Shared concerns

Questioned about their level of concern over their relationships, 18 percent of the superintendents characterized the concern as major, 35 percent said it was modest and 47 percent said they had little or no concern. The breakdown for board presidents was: 23 percent major concern, 30 percent modest and 47 percent little or none. In expressing little or no concern about their relationships as they stand, however, they clearly were not suggesting that they attached little or no importance to them. Instead, a large majority said they consider a good relationship so important that they spend a great deal of time making sure it doesn't become a matter of concern.

Overall, 92 percent of the superintendents and 65 per-

cent of the board presidents said they found it necessary to work continually at building or maintaining good relationships. They realize—and often said so—that constant nurturing of a healthy relationship is an imperative, perhaps the most important single thing they do to ensure good management and good schools. Why they feel that way and what they do to nurture it will be discussed in greater detail in later chapters.

Many pressures

Many superintendents who rated their relationships with boards as excellent also indicated on a follow-up question that they felt significant pressures from their boards. The most recurrent sources of these pressures were personalities of board members, outside pressures on boards, board frustration over financial matters, changed or increased demands of boards, lack of board members' leadership skills, board members with single constituencies, excessive involvement in administration, and frequent turnover of board members.

In their comments, superintendents see the need to work constantly to maintain good relationships with their boards. For example, Arnold Prince of the Gibbon, Minnesota, Public Schools said, "This public relationship is a balance at best and most any wind can tip the scales." And Robert C. Hill of Springfield, Illinois, School District 186 noted, "Such a relationship is no accident. It is continuously in peril due to the complexity of issues and demands."

Board presidents voiced similar comments. David Hausman of the West Monona Public Schools, Onawa, Iowa, summed it up this way: "When you fail to work at it, it soon deteriorates."

The results from the survey and accompanying comments underscored the fact that many superintendents and board members recognize that potential problems between them can lurk just beneath the surface. A fiscal crisis, outside pressures, a new board member—these are but a few of the things that can quickly disrupt smooth sailing.

While one of the greatest potential dangers facing boards and superintendents involves their understanding of their respective roles, the average citizen might consider that question ridiculously simple: the board sets the policies and the superintendent carries them out. But anyone familiar with education would have to respond that this definition is hopelessly simplistic: unfortunately, it doesn't always work that way.

It never has and probably never will, and a quick glance at the origins of school boards and school superintendents will reveal why. It may also help both boards and superintendents understand that neither side is at fault for the problems caused by confusions over roles, because there is no pat answer.

The historical evolution of roles

Coincidentally, this report is being prepared on the 100th anniversary of the first struggle between boards and superintendents over "who should govern" local schools. As we shall see, that initial clash in the 1890s grew out of the rise of the superintendency and claimed a number of fired chief executives as casualties.

That 19th Century fight marked a watershed in the evolution of the way schools are governed in the United States, an evolution that began in 1647 when the Massachusetts Bay Colony passed a law requiring all towns of a certain size to establish and maintain schools.

The year 1789 is also famous for another event besides the birth of this nation. It was the year that the Massachusetts legislature passed the first state school law and authorized towns to employ special committees elected by the people to oversee schools.

This bit of history is important to the question of board-superintendent roles because it underscores the tradition of citizen control of schools in America. Clearly, elected boards came first in the evolution of school governance and continue to be predominant for the stewardship of public education in this country.

But the growth and complexity of American society and its schools brought a new recognition that public education required more than lay leadership. In the most significant development since the founding of local schools in 1647, school governance in the 1840s and 1850s was changed from a one-headed to a two-headed system of leadership with the introduction of the superintendency. It was, most certainly, the beginning of the challenge to define governance roles.

Enter the superintendent

While superintendents were not bestowed with authority equal to that of school boards, their very existence, however vaguely defined, served to cloud the board's authority.

As education historian Raymond E. Callahan, professor emeritus at Washington University, tells the story, it began with an effort in the 1840s to create the new position of superintendent of schools in Boston. The reason for that

move is still pertinent. It was not that school board members lacked the time or expertise to run the schools, although these may have been secondary factors. It was primarily because group action has its limitations. As the Boston School Committee put it, the body was composed of 24 members who shared "a responsibility, which thus broken into fragments, presses on no one."

Then, like today, they needed an individual to be held accountable for getting things done. But the changeover was not accomplished without stiff resistance, and it was 1851 before the Boston school board appointed the first full-time superintendent.

Cities across the nation followed Boston's example over the next several decades and the superintendency became a fixture in tandem with the school board in most areas. But the authority granted to superintendents varied widely, and it was sometimes minimal in those early days. Boards, usually elected from wards, continued to be active in the operational sphere, "visiting schools, overseeing almost all administrative detail, and making most fiscal decisions," historian David Tyack of Stanford University said.

Corruption key factor

The movement toward a professional school administration headed by an appointed superintendent picked up steam partly because of political corruption in the cities. Ward bosses did help millions of immigrants find their way in the new land, Tyack pointed out, but the "graft, patronage and favoritism" were costly to schools. The cry went out for superintendents to assume a greater share of the power from boards to lift schools out of party politics.

The idea was given a big boost in a series of magazine articles published in 1892-93 by noted education reformer Joseph Rice, who deplored the condition of American schools. He placed a large part of the blame on interference in school management by school boards, accusing many board members of using schools for their own selfish or political gain. He urged voters everywhere to elect boards that would give the superintendent "a sufficient amount of independent power to enable him to improve the schools in any manner that may to him seem fit."

The distinction between the 'legislative' function and the 'executive' function was blurred and apparently, despite decades of effort by school administrators, it remains blurred.

Superintendents took up the call, Callahan says, and the battle was joined. Operation of schools by lay boards was likened to "semi-barbarism" by some superintendents. School boards formed their own national organization to help coordinate the fight and accused superintendents of being power-hungry and undemocratic. The battle was waged for years, but after 1895, Callahan said, superintendents gradually gained more direct authority over school programs in districts across the nation.

This shift was caused in part by schools being largely removed from ward politics during the municipal reform movement. Another major factor was the 20th Century movement to design schools along the lines of an industrial model using scientific management principles, which called for an expert administrator to be given wider authority over operations. But superintendents never gained the full degree of independence that many had sought in the 19th Century.

Muddying the waters

The question of how much power each should exercise in running schools was never resolved. William Bruce, a leading spokesman for school boards who created the *School Board Journal* in 1891, agreed that the superintendent should be recognized as the educational expert but he was not willing to concede that the board's function was simply to legislate; it was also to "administer."

According to Callahan, Bruce "succeeded in muddying the waters, and school administrators have been trying to clear them up ever since." The distinction between the "legislative" function and the "executive" function was blurred, Callahan concluded, "and apparently, despite decades of effort by school administrators, it remains blurred."

Inherent in the system?

This look at the origins of board-superintendent relationships shows clearly that the confusion is rooted in the institution of school governance itself, leading Callahan to remark that "certain problems, principally that of the proper division of power and functions between lay school boards and professional school people, are inherent in the system." Some contend that the problem goes even beyond schools and that "representation and administration are

inherently at odds" in all government, as professor William L. Boyd of Pennsylvania State University put it. It may be, he said, that "there is an inescapable tension between the needs of the two functions, i.e., for democratic deliberation on the one hand and efficient, expeditious action on the other hand."

The lesson to be learned from this slice of history is that present-day board members and superintendents are hardly justified in blaming each other when sincere efforts to achieve clear roles prove difficult. Even their ancestors who built the institution couldn't find the formula.

And today, they are struggling for answers as much as ever. "Boards and superintendents are swallowing hard on some things," said consultant Charles Young. "At all the retreats I attend, they are searching for a comfortable feeling (about roles). They constantly ask, 'What is going on in other parts of the country?' It's a dynamic issue."

So What Else Is New?

"The superintendent's position is a difficult one. He is the ready target for unreasonable parents, disgruntled teachers and officious school board members. In a vortex of school board quarrels, he is the first to become crushed."

William Bruce, editor of the American School Board Journal in 1895, as quoted by historian Raymond Callahan.

Schools and the body politic

Another reason for confusion over roles is the increasing involvement of superintendents in community matters on behalf of schools. This activity sets up a potential rivalry with boards, which, by their very nature, are "political" bodies elected to represent the public will.

Harold Webb, former executive director of the National School Boards Association (NSBA), in describing boards' roles, once said that NSBA "has long recognized the inextricable bond between the worlds of education and politics." But the corresponding role of superintendents has not always been as frankly acknowledged and accepted. Although not usually labeled as "political," the executive leadership role of superintendents has evolved to include community involvement and public relations as essential job responsibilities.

There are two dimensions to this role, and, it should be emphasized, neither conveys a negative connotation. One aspect involves the managerial duty of the superintendent in "determining who gets what, when, and under what circumstances in order to achieve desirable ends—a classic formulation of political behavior," Professor Larry Cuban of Stanford University said.

The other dimension is more obviously political because it entails involvement in the political activities of the community. Cuban noted that superintendents were talking as early as the 1870s about the need to secure public support for schools because "they faced varied groups, ranging in views from complete endorsement of the schools to undisguised hostility" and "they knew that the schools needed both financial and moral support of the majority." It was, he added, "the seedbed for political behavior."

Political role of superintendents

Basically, Cuban said, the political role of superintendents "refers to the goals held and the process superintendents used to determine and transform personal and public expectations into formal politics and official actions." It also refers, he said, "to the authority, rules, and influence that superintendents exert in governing a school district."

Boards make policy, Cuban acknowledged, but "superintendents determine to what extent a policy is implemented as intended, converted to fit the particular contours of the district, or shelved." They do so through "their decisions and actions, by their exercise of formal and informal power, their display of interpersonal skills, their core values, and their perspectives on what is and is not possible," he said.

As the political role of superintendents grew, Cuban continued, "political action within the district organization also emerged in the complex relationships between the school board and the superintendent." It affected what happened "within the organization, where persuasion, negotiation, and compromise blurred the boundaries of school affairs" between boards and superintendents.

Politics breeds resentment

School boards have usually welcomed and even encouraged participation of superintendents in these kinds of activities to gain community support and understanding of

school needs. Still, it means dual roles for superintendents and boards in the realm of politics, and some boards have privately resented the way superintendents have injected themselves into politics just as superintendents have objected to boards meddling in administration.

This political dimension may contribute to what Professor Luvern L. Cunningham of Ohio State University has called "an apparent competitiveness" between board members and superintendents. It can be of intense concern to members with political ambitions, he noted. "If the superintendent is always seen on TV or sought out by the press, board members become anxious," Cunningham wrote. "They develop resentments regarding the popularity of their chief executive." It seems to occur, he added, "even when board members admire and respect their superintendent."

Lee Etta Powell, superintendent-in-residence and professor of educational leadership at George Washington University, said it is perfectly proper for superintendents to engage in "selling and seeking support for schools." But she noted that "boards may see themselves in competition with the superintendents and may resent (the superintendents') visibility and acceptance in the community."

Contemporary roles

Throughout the 20th century, board-superintendent roles have continued to evolve within the traditional framework of boards as policy makers and superintendents as implementers of those policies. It reflects Americans' "peculiar notion that there is a distinction between policy making and policy administration," which some regard as a "myth," said Professor Frederick M. Wirt of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. But the distinction is real—although still ill-defined and seemingly always shifting.

One problem in clarifying those roles is that the legal description of the school superintendent is ambiguous in state laws. The basic issue of whether the superintendent should be considered an officer or an employee of a school district has been interpreted differently in state courts, according to "The Organization and Control of American Schools," by Roald F. Campbell, the late professor emeritus at the University of Utah, and his associates. And to complicate the picture even more, education codes in only about half the states contain any language defining the relationship between the board and the superintendent.

Another source of confusion is the legal responsibility that school boards have for hiring and firing personnel, and the practice of assigning that responsibility to superintendents. As Campbell and his associates pointed out, under state laws "boards cannot delegate to their administrative officers . . . the authority to carry out acts that boards alone are empowered to perform. A classic example is the power to employ teachers: boards cannot delegate this power under any circumstance." This means that boards must carry out certain legal responsibilities, but as a practical matter they must rely heavily on the recommendations of the administrative staff, which is involved in the day-to-day operations of schools.

The board's power to employ covers administrators and most other school employees as well. But in nearly all school districts, it is the superintendent who makes personnel decisions. Technically, the superintendent may only "recommend" personnel actions to the board for its decision, but superintendents usually make personnel decisions de facto. So if a board decides to assert its legal authority by engaging directly in personnel decisions, it may violate the principle of accountability that says employees must be answerable to those who hire, supervise and evaluate them. But the board will be technically on sound legal ground. Thus lurks an inherent potential for a clash of statutory and management principles.

Trustees or delegates?

School boards over the years have also been unable to distinguish their own role between that of "trustee" or "delegate" in carrying out their public trust. Trustees usually are viewed as representing the broad public interest, PSU's Boyd notes, while delegates represent more individual interests, including "various classes, ethnic groups and subcommunities." Trustees also tend to make their own judgments on policy matters while delegates try to be more responsive to the desires of their constituents. The difference is important to board-superintendent relations because, some believe, as trustees, board members are more likely to defer to the professional expertise of superintendents.

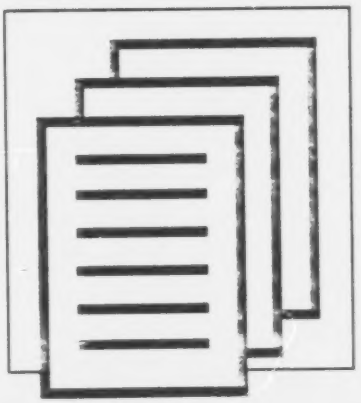
In fact, some argue, there has been a long-term trend toward this kind of trustee orientation among school boards, Boyd said. "School board members appear to be immunized against any requisite to follow the preferences of the citizenry," a study by Joseph T. Hentges, superintendent of the Community Unit School District 200 in Woodstock, Illinois, found.

Who's in charge?

Slowly over time, the original issue of how to define board-superintendent roles has been broadened to include

The First Superintendent's Job Description—in English

"To watch over the schools; to know the exact condition of every one, in all particulars; to bring the lagging forward; to suffer no defects to become prescriptive, no abuses to be indurated by time; to acquire and to impart such information as shall bring all our schools to that degree of excellence which our citizens not only have a right to demand, but without which they have no right, in justice to themselves and to their children, to



be satisfied. This should be his business, his whole business; and he should be adequately paid. Although chosen annually, like our masters, his tenure of office, like theirs, would be permanent, if he discharged the duties of his office acceptably; and if he did not, another should be chosen in his stead."

—Boston School Committee, 1840s, as quoted by historian Raymond E. Callahan.

the question: who is actually in control? This certainly implies that boards have come to share some of their statutory power with superintendents, whose influence, most authorities agree, has grown in this century.

One simple fact stands out: "As school districts have become larger and the process and organization of schooling has become more complex, school boards have had to turn more and more of the actual administration and policy making for the schools over to trained educators," Boyd said.

In his study of 188 superintendents and 379 board members during the 1980s, Hentges discovered that "boards appear to allow the superintendent's initiatives to prevail when internal policy issues are involved." But "when conflicts involve strategic issues that have the potential for visible and tangible effects on the community as well as on the school system, school board authority is likely to be asserted."

Boyd said there is a great deal of research showing that the influence of superintendents over boards varies significantly with the size, heterogeneity, urbanism, and regional locale of districts. As a rule, he said, the "influence and autonomy of administrators seems to increase with the size and heterogeneity of the district." That was written in the mid-1970s, and whether it still holds true, given the relatively high turnover rate of superintendents in big cities, is uncertain.

Other evidence shows that a lot depends on the socioeconomic status of school communities. In higher socioeconomic districts, there was much less conflict between the board and superintendent, one study found, but boards in "lower-status districts were much more likely to interfere in administrative matters and have tense relations with their professional staff," Boyd said. The reason for the difference was that higher-status districts typically had "boards composed largely of highly educated persons from professional and managerial occupations who respected, and were inclined to defer to, professional expertise."

A new imbalance

But the situation continues to seesaw. In the Civil Rights era of the 1960s and 1970s, school boards increasingly asserted their authority over school operations in trying to respond to equity demands by the citizenry and the grasp for power by teacher unions. And now, at least in urban areas, there is a perception that school board control is on the rise once more.

Professor Jerome T. Murphy of Harvard University recently remarked on the declining influence of superintendents and what he implied was a growing imbalance of power with boards. Wirt said a "period of professional dominance" by superintendents may be shifting. (Other observers, he noted, see this as but one part of the larger "revolt of the client" against all kinds of professionals occurring in America and elsewhere.)

In his study, Hentges found that educational governance has become increasingly politicized over the past several decades and when board members with experience in

political activities are elected, it "contributes to a predisposition on the part of school boards to resist superintendent control."

Political scientists Harmon Zeigler and Kent Jennings argued that many boards have been turned into activist agencies responding to pressures for desegregation, community participation, student rights, teacher power, and other interest groups' demands. All of which, Wirt adds, can be seen working against the dominance by the professional superintendent. It is part of what H. Thomas James, former Stanford University education dean, termed in the early 1980s "a remarkable democratization in the membership of school boards."

People in school districts see the same thing. "There is much more involvement of boards than in the past," said consultant Karl Plath. "That used to be the exception to the rule. The superintendent had always played the leadership role in policy development."

Tensions over gray areas

So where does this all leave us after 100 years? "Board members continue to grapple with tensions over necessarily gray areas between a board's policy making and the superintendent's administrative responsibilities," the Institute for Educational Leadership concluded in its 1986 report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership." Cunningham said the board-superintendent relationship is "still saturated with difficulty and often misunderstanding." He summed up his thinking this way:

"It is frequently argued that administrators should stay out of policy and that board members should refrain from intervening in administrative affairs. On the surface at least, there is need to retain some clarity in defining these responsibilities. In its simplest form, administrators should tend to administrative matters and policy makers should attend to policy matters. In the day-to-day welter of management, however, those lines become blurred."

Clearly, then, much tension over roles remains. But how much actual conflict? Hentges' study in the mid-1980s found it to be "quite limited" and other evidence points to the same conclusion.

Rankings unchanged

AASA's 10-year *Study of the American Public School Superintendency*, published in 1992, found that the ranking of board-superintendent relations had remained unchanged since 1982 among issues and challenges facing superintendents. It ranked sixth in this survey of superintendents across the nation. Another AASA report, "Opinions and Status of AASA Members for 1990-91," showed that 62 percent of the superintendents ranked relations with boards as excellent, compared with 63 percent in 1989-90 and 56 percent in 1979-80.

Illinois superintendents also ranked their relationships with boards high. About 63 percent said they were "positive/constructive," 25 percent classified them as "good/necessary tasks get done" and the remaining 12 percent assessed relations as "average to hostile," according to a 1991 survey by the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

The AASA study also found that "conflict with board members" ranked a distant second (17 percent) among reasons for leaving the last superintendency. Moving up to a superintendency in a larger district ranked first (43 percent) by a wide margin.

Pressures will continue

Board-superintendent conflict in big-city districts may be another story, and that issue is explored in Chapter 4.

Nevertheless, there are many unmistakable signs that outside pressures will continue to mount on boards at all levels as they continue to play more active leadership roles, and that these pressures may well add strain to boards' relationships with superintendents.

Speaking about board-superintendent roles, Boyd said that "it seems clear from the history of public administration that we shall never find a balance of values that will stand indefinitely. Thus, we can never expect that school board-administrative staff relationships ever will be easily defined or regulated."

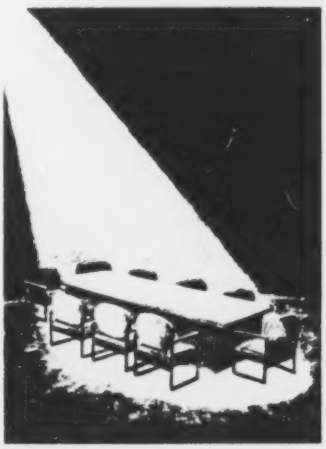
But it is critical that boards and superintendents find solutions to this problem for the well-being of schools and their students. If not, "the needs of children may get lost in the adult problems and concerns," Cunningham said. "The consistent tension between adult needs, as reflected in school board and superintendent issues, and the genuine, enduring requirements of children and youth are at the heart of policy and executive dilemmas."

CHAPTER TWO

Roles for the 1990s and Beyond:

What Are They and What Should They Be?

The textbook definition of separate roles—boards make policy and superintendents administer it—doesn't always work in practice, so whatever they choose to call it, board members and superintendents have had to come up with their own rules, guidelines, codes, practices, or definitions.



Why doesn't the textbook definition always work? Because it is too rigid and too absolute to fit all situations. On that point there is a solid consensus among superintendents, board members, consultants, university professors and others interviewed for this Critical Issues Report as well as among respondents to the survey for this report.

In the survey, board presidents and superintendents of separate school districts were asked this question:

"Do you agree that the traditional roles of the board and superintendent should be strictly defined, with the board responsible only for policy and the superintendent responsible only for administration?"

Superintendents answered 70 percent yes and 30 percent no. Board presidents answered 71 percent yes and 29 percent no.

Then they were asked:

"Some think flexibility should be permitted to allow the board and superintendent to cross over into each other's domain of policy making and administration when both parties understand and agree it is desirable."

Superintendents and board presidents answered that question identically: 60 percent yes and 40 percent no.

Sound contradictory? Yes, but in fact there was remarkable consistency in their answers. Based on the comments that both groups were invited to add to their yes/no answers, here is what most were saying: there should be fundamental policy and administration roles for boards and superintendents, respectively. But there should also be flexibility in those roles.

Teamwork imperative

Some clearly want rigid lines drawn between roles and others favor wide flexibility. The largest percentage, however, while seeing a need for some degree of separation between the roles, feel the necessity for sharing roles and responsibilities depending on the circumstances, and, as many emphasized, *when both parties understand and agree it is desirable*. Here are some comments from superintendents:

"There should be a defining of roles, but I do not believe it is always realistic for the policy/administration roles to be strictly followed in a traditional way," said Homer F. Mincy, Upper Arlington City School District, Ohio.

"It is impossible to strictly define the difference between policy and administration. It is more important that the board and superintendent develop honestly open communications with each other and develop a high trust level," said R. Larry Stucky, Rittman Exempted Village schools, Ohio.

"You can 'strictly' define it [roles] all you want to, but in the end there is a relationship that must exist or all the language in the world won't help you. To some extent [flexibility] is inevitable for a smooth-functioning board," said Eugene A. Diggs, Thomaston Public Schools, Connecticut.

"This must be a team operation. If we start to worry about who is supposed to do what all the time, there will be little focus on how to address the major problems, i.e., increasing success for *all* students," said William P. Kipp, Redding Elementary School District, California.

"Board members have their own areas of expertise. Using that in the administration of the district is sometimes more effective than if the superintendent alone administers. On the other side, the superintendent often sees policy implications that board members don't, and the board should use that superintendent's knowledge in setting the policies," said H. Jerome Hansen, Shelton School District, Washington.

Not black or white

"The line should not always be black and white. The interest and expertise of individual board members should be utilized for useful educational purposes. We must be flexible in a board-superintendent partnership by focusing on what is best for students. Selfish pride, prestige and power are the three P's that sink individuals and boards. They also are the motivations for drawing lines that unfortunately cannot be crossed. We need an attitude that 'we do not care who gets the credit as long as the job gets accomplished.' Then the benefits of educational flexibility will benefit a school district," said Vern Bennett, Fargo Public Schools, North Dakota.

"I do not know if this [strictly defined roles] is possible any more but it surely would make life simpler, more efficient and more effective. Two cooks in the kitchen usually spoil the broth," said Chris L. Huber, Spring Lake Park Independent School District No. 16, Minnesota.

"Each party needs to understand its role. An organization cannot function properly if there are not clear lines to follow. The line needs to be there. Flexibility comes from the understanding created when communications, conversation and consensus are generated through meetings and committee work," said Kenneth R. Helling, Independent School District No. 739, Kimball, Minnesota.

Some board presidents differ

Here are some comments from board presidents:

"This [traditional roles] is the way it should be, but sometimes the nature of an issue may result in some intrusion by either party into the other's area," said David Hausman, West Monona Public Schools, Onawa, Iowa.

"I somewhat agree [on traditional roles]; however, our superintendent likes input from the board or just the board chair on certain administrative issues," said Karen Novak, Independent School District 129, Montevideo, Minnesota.

"Absolutely [traditional roles]! The problem with this crucial concept is making new board members understand it. This [flexibility] is a recipe not for 'flexibility' but for politicization of the board-superintendent relationship," said John L. Lemega, West Hartford Public Schools, Connecticut.

"The interaction between policy and its implementation is most successful when there is the mutual respect and trust so that each side understands that they are both working to support the creation and maintenance of a healthy, educational environment," said Doris Wakeland, Silver Consolidated School District No. 1, Silver City, New Mexico

"A school district can only have one chief. The board lacks the training to manage the district," said Robert G. MacGregor, Somers Central School District, Lincolndale, New York.

Theory and practice

Now, let's look closer at these perceptions in theory and practice. Of course, boards are responsible for adopting the overall policies that guide the operation of schools. No one questions that legal responsibility. And everyone agrees that some kind of distinction between policy and administration must remain as a basic parameter.

But boards don't formulate policies in a vacuum. As political scientist Harmon Zeigler pointed out, their "background and experience compels them to look toward the superintendent's office for leadership." In other words, in almost every case, the superintendent of necessity has a big hand in how policies get formulated and, therefore, what gets approved. Michael D. Usdan, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership, remarked that "if a superintendent is not interested in initiating policy, he or she shouldn't be in the business."

"The proper relationship is for boards to set policy and for superintendents to execute it," consultant Carroll Johnson said. "But boards can't make policy apart from the superintendent." Superintendent Allen W. Moen of Independent School District No. 883 in Rockford, Minnesota, agreed, saying, "Situations arise, for example, where the absence of policy necessitates the superintendent's role in

policy making." Another superintendent, Thomas A. Brown of the South Colonie Central Schools, Albany, New York, said, "Board members need to understand the operation of the district to effectively do their jobs (but) the superintendent must have a role in the development of policy to ensure adequate functioning of the district."

As a practical matter . . .

Most board members concede they don't have the technical expertise in instruction, finance, management and other areas to create feasible, workable policy by themselves. Neither do they have the time in most instances. As a practical matter, then, superintendents do "make policy" in some fashion. "The more I became experienced, the more I understood that superintendents in many instances did everything," said retired superintendent Kenneth Peters. "As superintendent I did (in effect) set policy."

Robert Spillane, superintendent of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools, agreed: "I help make policy because I recommend policy." Professor Larry Cuban of Stanford University, a former Virginia superintendent, added, "To argue that superintendents don't make policy is absurd."

It's not that superintendents "dictate" policy to boards, or that boards are ever left out of the policy-making process. Probably without exception, boards have always formally approved district policies as prescribed by law and still do. But, in reality, policy making seems most often to be a product of a joint effort.

Boards in administration

Similarly, boards do get involved in the administrative side of the enterprise. As with superintendents playing a role in policy making, it sometimes makes sense, as a practical matter, for board members to have a say in program implementation, many survey participants and others interviewed for this report said.

Robert C. Hill, superintendent of Springfield, Illinois, School District No. 186, said, "My board members are bright, capable people. They often have good ideas that could be lost if these artificial barriers (roles) are erected." Superintendent William Attea of the Glenview, Illinois, Public Schools, noted, "We're in the people business and can do our best when we use the ideas of many people to solve problems, including the board's ideas."

Martin J. Loughlin, superintendent of the Alleghany Highlands Public Schools, Covington, Virginia, said, "At times, a board member has a better understanding and/or more knowledge about an issue."

"Clearly, I understand that the board makes policy and the superintendent carries it out," said Eugene Karol, superintendent of the Calvert County Public Schools in Prince Frederick, Maryland, "but any superintendent would be a fool not to pay attention to the advice of boards. It doesn't mean they are stepping in (to administration). It's still (the superintendent's) call. But no one has any corner on the brain market. My board members also have bright ideas."

Peters said early in his career he realized he would be "stupid" not to capitalize on the abilities of his board members and have them advise him on what would commonly be considered administrative responsibilities.

None of these superintendents was suggesting that boards would or should be ordering superintendents how to manage operations, any more than a superintendent dictates policy to a board when they share in policy making.

In both policy development as well as policy implementation, Karol pointed out, "the superintendent has to be careful not to take things to the board he knows they're not going to support." This clearly means that a great deal of give and take should go on—and probably usually does occur—between the board and superintendent before any formal action is taken in public to either approve a policy or announce an operational plan.

The pendulum swings

AASA's 10-year *Study of the American School Superintendency*, published in 1992, says that "during the 1980s and early 1990s, the policy making pendulum has swung back and forth between the superintendent and school board, reflecting the fact that education leaders and theoreticians disagree about what constitutes policy making and what constitutes management."

Some board members, superintendents, and consultants insist that the emphasis should be on roles with clear and relatively inflexible demarcations. Although they don't contend there can never be exceptions, they are wary of the consequences.

"There should be a separation of powers with the board as the legislative and the superintendent as the executive," consultant Richard Foster said. "If you cross over, you've got conflict—even if both sides agree. I'm about a purist." Robert Weppner, board president of the Pocatello School District No. 25 in Idaho, agreed, saying, "We [board members] aren't administrators." Crossover into other roles should only be allowed "in isolated instances," he said.

Another consultant, Charles Raab, said that "when boards don't stay in the policy role, you have problems." Florence Baugh, a member of the Buffalo, New York, Board of Education for 16 years, said "too much flexibility" is being permitted in board-superintendent roles. "It's a great mistake when boards cross over the line into areas reserved for the superintendent," she said. "If both sides would adhere to their proper roles, there would be less tension. The board needs to see its proper role as policy maker and not encroach on the responsibilities that the superintendent is selected to carry out."

Sammy Quintana, a member of the Pojoaque Valley Independent School District near Santa Fe, New Mexico, said his colleagues "all realize that we hire the best superintendent available and then let him manage the schools and we stay out." He said the approach is "not rigid but we see our role as a policy maker and let the superintendent run things."

A gray line . . .

But the majority opinion—based on interviews for this report, comments from the AASA survey and professional studies—supports flexibility within the general parameters of policy making/administering roles. Some of the differences are matters of degree: not *whether* but *how much* flexibility should be allowed. But clearly the consensus favors so much flexibility that there seems to be a major departure from the traditional textbook definition calling for clear separation of roles.

The adjective "gray" came up again and again. For example:

- There is a gray line between policy and administration," said Thomas Payzant, superintendent of the San Diego city school district. "There has to be some fluidity with understandings anchored in traditional roles."
- Milt Goldberg, director of the Office of Research in the U.S. Department of Education, said "gray areas are inevitable" in board-superintendent roles.
- The traditional role definition "makes it sound black and white but where the lines meet it is gray," said Carol Grosse, superintendent of the Alhambra public schools, Phoenix, Arizona.
- The traditional definition "has really never been true," Spillane said "There has always been a gray line. There has never been a clear line."

. . . or none at all

Some say they can't see any line at all. "There is no clear delineation between policy and administration," said Superintendent Joseph T. Hentges of the Woodstock, Illinois, Community School District 200. "If there were, why do superintendents advise on policy?" Consultant Jim Huge said, "If there ever was a line that separated policy and administration, I never found it. I don't think it exists." Barbara Wheeler, a board member of the Community High School District No. 99 in Downers Grove, Illinois, said, "If someone can show me a clear-cut distinction in roles, then the second coming has arrived."

In fact, there are those who think it is folly to look for one. "It almost doesn't matter because you can't find a line anyway," said Professor James Guthrie of the University of California at Berkeley. "For years, I've seen it as a ridiculous argument to try and segment the roles very tightly," said consultant Vic Cottrell. "That boards go off and do policy and all the superintendent needs to do is implement—it's absolutely absurd. The board makes policy from quality input from key people, including the superintendent. The superintendent is responsible for administration but needs input from the people who are affected, which is the board."

Consultant Charles Young said the roles of boards and superintendents are changing constantly and "anyone who thinks they can be fixed and unchanged is crazy."

The problem, Cunningham noted, is that on close examination, it is extremely difficult to separate the policy, oversight, financial, personnel, political and other functions of boards and superintendents. "Some would agree

that these are inseparable, that educational policy is inextricably intertwined with issues of finance and personnel and that finance and personnel questions have educational policy implications," he said.

A system of rigid roles opens the way for either the board or superintendent "to hide behind the system," Cottrell said. For example, "if the superintendent is ineffective, he can blame policy and say the board made the policy and it's not my fault. "You can't legislate relationships in thick policy manuals" because it ignores the need for human interaction and shared responsibility.

AASA-NSBA Statement on Board-Superintendent Roles

"Serving as a professional adviser to the school board is one of the key roles the superintendent plays. Although the board is not bound to accept the superintendent's advice, it nonetheless should not establish policy without first consulting the superintendent, its chief professional adviser. In the same vein, the superintendent should not institute far-reaching administrative procedures without giving the board an opportunity to review proposed rules and to assure they adhere to board policy. Moreover, the board should have regular opportunities to review existing administrative procedures to test whether they conform to policy. The emphasis must be on communication—the sharing of information between board and superintendent. The process should not focus on approval to be sought or won, but on the development of mutual understanding."

—Talking About the Superintendent's Employment Contract, joint publication of the American Association of School Administrators and the National School Boards Association, 1990.

Playing by the rules

"As long as everyone plays by these informal rules and no one violates the norms, such situations seem to be satisfactory," Cunningham wrote. "If board members have substantial confidence in their superintendents and if superintendents think well of their board members, such reversals of the classic definition of responsibility seem to serve the public interest."

Consultant Ira Krinsky agrees. He calls role definition a "straw man" and says it is not worth worrying about. Boards and superintendents are always operating in the other's domain, he said. "You have to decide on ground rules and the way the board and superintendent define their roles should be the basis for how education works best in that district."

School boards today are being called upon to play a greater role in school leadership—and many are seeking to—and it is the superintendent who must be more flexible in this climate, some superintendents and board members say. Joan Kowal, superintendent of the Volusia County School District in DeLand, Florida, said there is "no one clear-cut, defined role of the superintendent as in the 1950s."

"I was educated at a time when the rule was boards make policy and superintendents implement it," said James Buchanan, superintendent of the Tempe Union High School District in Arizona. "It was not very realistic then and it's not now. Board members feel a greater need to be actively involved in the school decision-making process. We have moved in America from representative democracy to participatory democracy, and board members want it to be participatory."

Norbert Schuerman, superintendent of the Omaha School District No. 1 in Nebraska, feels it is important to realize that the "board needs to be sensitive to its constituency and that it's the board's district, not the superintendent's district." Schuerman said there "needs to be communication" about responsibilities and "the superintendent cannot hardline it on a consistent basis when there may be (board) movement into administration."

William Soult, a board member in the St. Vrain School District in Longmont, Colorado, said that while a board should understand that it has a paid professional to implement its policies, its role often is affected by "the greater knowledge and ability that many members have today. They are simply more knowledgeable about school operations, and the superintendent will have to be more understanding and more flexible."

Goldberg, of the U.S. Department of Education, said that while role flexibility is necessary it is also important to define the responsibilities in some measure "so account-

ability is clear." He noted that "the murkier the lines get regarding responsibility the easier it is to lose sight of who is accountable, which can lead to conflict and fingerpointing." Thus, he added, "in the end they have to shape their own actions in terms of local conditions and define roles in the context of what they want schools to accomplish. That question has to be answered explicitly."

A collaborative effort

The consensus is that board and superintendent roles should reflect what Cuban calls "an interactive relationship." Art Gosling, superintendent of the Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools, said he believes that "boards and superintendents should provide leadership as a whole" and they should "look at roles as a collaborative model." Gosling said he and the Arlington board "are not confused over roles. We have found issues we want to approach in different ways but have found agreement by having a candid relationship and not getting in a contest (over roles)." He said that "superintendents need to have an understanding of the sweep of change occurring in society and to figure out how the board fits into that. You have to work hard at it."

Finch agrees that a collaborative effort is needed, saying, "I'm not sure you need to delineate the roles. You need to sit down and decide what that (collaborative) effort involves. It is impossible to put down in a fixed statement exactly what the responsibilities are. You need to flow with it."

The key to successful board-superintendent relationships in this context of flexibility is agreement on what that means. Conrad Briner, retired professor at the Claremont Graduate School, was one of the first to advocate role flexibility in the early 1970s. He believes that to achieve cooperation "it is important for both the board and superintendent to know what the other is thinking about and to work at deciding what they want to achieve together and why." He sees them bonding through a common mission of school improvement.

How NSBA Sees Roles of Boards, Superintendents

"...there are no pat formulas regarding how these relationships work or should work, what roles each should play, or what actions each should take. Boards and superintendents both play leading roles in school districts. Their jobs are interactive, perhaps overlapping; their goals should be the same. . . .

"Sometimes, the distinction between policy and administration is portrayed as if, somewhere, there were an authoritative definition that will serve all boards and superintendents everywhere. In practice, the relationship between board and superintendent differs from district to district; it differs on different issues within a district; and it may differ at different phases in the life of a particular relationship...

"Nevertheless, in practice, there exists a real distinction between what boards do and what superintendents do, and the phrases 'make policy' and 'administer policy' are conventional terms for this distinction. What is important in a district is not that people use these terms, but that an understanding develops between each board and superintendent about their respective roles."

—*Becoming A Better Board Member*, NSBA.

Understanding from the start

"It's really a question of negotiated agreements between superintendents and boards," said consultant Karl Plath. "It is essential to reach an understanding of expectations at the point of entry (hiring) and to have periodic reviews." Huge agreed, saying "the key is that everyone understands what they (the roles) are, and all agree on outside parameters." For example, he said:

"Policy and administration should be done as a team effort. The superintendent initiates and reacts to policy. The superintendent ought to be held accountable for implementation. The board can comment and advise (on implementation). Quarterly, the board can sit down and talk about implementation. As a policy maker, the board can listen to a lot of people. Any decisions should be made by the board and superintendent together."

Consultant William Mahoney says a "pragmatic approach is needed, and if anyone is going to be a successful superintendent, one characteristic has to be to compromise

and flexibility." The lack of it is "almost always the problem" when boards and superintendents do not get along, he said.

Finch said he sees his relationship with the board as "a team or collaborative effort, rather than a separation of powers. Part of my role is to influence opinion, and I do a lot of groundwork in advance of any decision." This groundwork, including interaction with the board, makes almost any significant decision a joint decision, whether it is in the policy or administrative sphere.

This approach—flexibility within parameters agreed upon in frank, continuing discussions between boards and superintendents—probably holds the best promise for healthy relationships, according to the consensus view. It should reduce conflict, supporters of this view say, but it won't completely eliminate tension between boards and superintendents.

"There is inherent tension in the area of board-CEO relations," agreed consultant Kenneth Underwood. It can be minimized, but even the best relationship can't get rid of it all. "The point is they shouldn't take it personally," he said. "They should be able to have disagreements and thrash them out." Jerry Parker, superintendent of the Pekin School District No. 108 near Peoria, Illinois, said, "It's not easy to say this is your responsibility and this is mine in an era of shared decision making."

And perhaps it shouldn't be completely tension-free. Hentges said he thinks some tensions can be useful, and some of his colleagues agree. "Tension can be positive," he said. "I work better when kept on edge." If the superintendent and board have a good relationship, there will be less conflict, he said, but there still may be tension."

Involvement of boards

But if a healthy dose of pragmatism is a good idea, why exactly do superintendents find it advantageous to involve boards in operations? And how much?

Involve is the key word here. Some superintendents say it means simply informing board members in advance of administrative actions they are about to take. Others acknowledge it amounts to a form of sharing by boards in decisions. The best approach depends on the issue at hand. Superintendent Zeno B. Katterle of the Gresham School District, Gresham, Oregon, said the "involvement can range from making decisions to sharing information." Whatever the point along that continuum, the superintendents who embrace it say board involvement pays off for them.

Parker said that "since I intrude into policy making, I sometimes will run my (operational) intentions by the board to get their reaction" before making a decision. "It is only prudent and fair."

For example, when transferring principals, which is part of his administrative role, Parker says he lets the board know what he is contemplating. "It is my job to transfer, but if the board is involved up front, I get some idea of their support if it runs into difficulty. Principals are very visible to the community and it gives the board a little ownership of the decision." In this way, the board is much less likely to criticize the decision later if it had a hand in making it, he said.

Spillane said the primary reason he involves board members is that "I want them to have some sense of ownership" of an important decision. "If they have no say, why should they support it?" Eugene Tucker, superintendent of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, Santa Monica, California, said that "providing the board opportunities to review proposed administrative regulations prior to implementation is a good way to enhance understanding of and agreement about the intent of a policy."

Hentges said the question of whether the board should be involved in administration is much less significant in a "collaborative decision making model." He added, "If there is trust, I am going to look for advice from the board to get a reading of the community and the situation. The board wants me to be successful and would want to warn me if it sees problems. It's less of an issue of control and more of an issue of making good decisions by a management team. (In this way of thinking), the board is not interfering or controlling my decisions but making sure I make good decisions."

What is involvement?

Professor Robert Crowson of the University of Illinois at Chicago said involvement of boards in administrative decision making has long been a practice of "savvy superintendents." They have usually done it to "test the waters" and "it could have been seen as intrusive but it wasn't."

Gosling calls it "doing my homework with the board ahead of time." He said "from (selecting) principals on up, the board signs off." He says it's only "smart business" but doesn't see it as board intrusion into administration.

He cited the example of a controversy over school bus service, which he said had created considerable pressure on the board. The alleged safety issue that had been raised by some parents was questionable, a staff review showed. "Although it clearly was a managerial matter, I decided to run it by the board president and one other member I meet

with weekly," he said. "I asked them to see what their antenna picked up (regarding community sentiment). I thought that would give me a clearer idea of what I wanted to do and whether I would have board support for it."

Karol said he likes to "bounce things off" the board. "I say, 'I'm thinking of doing this, what do you think? Do you have any other ideas? If yes, say so.'" He said he does not regard this tactic as involving the board in administrative decision making but admits that his inquiries do have "the potential for influencing my own decisions."

Personnel decisions

One very sensitive area of board-superintendent relations is personnel hiring. Is flexibility the right standard here, too? Huge notes that in nearly every state, "the board is the only one which can hire and fire." But almost always, boards approve the recommendations of superintendents so in actual practice the superintendents make nearly all of the personnel decisions.

Boards, of course, make the biggest personnel decision in hiring and firing the superintendent, but beyond that, what is their role?

"If I had to pick an issue, it is the one I probably feel strongest about," Payzant said, likely reflecting the view of most superintendents. "I've had situations in the past where some board members have tried to push certain people (to be hired). Where it becomes a pattern, it becomes a formula for trouble."

Grosse said, "I frequently tell my board when they get into personnel, 'Please hold me accountable but don't go around me.'"

The tradition, of course, is for boards to stay out of most personnel hiring, Huge said, but "there is no right or wrong answer in the appointment of principals" and some other administrators. "It (board involvement) may work well if the board and superintendent feel it is acceptable," he said. "Clear criteria will help here."

The extent varies

Most superintendents might be unwilling even to go that far. However, some—no one knows for sure how many—may involve boards in subtle ways before hiring certain employees, such as principals or central office administrators, in positions that are highly visible to the community. The extent of board involvement probably varies widely among districts.

One superintendent said the extent of board involvement in personnel actions "depends on the circumstances and the board," but "I would discourage it." Still, he added, "I always keep the board apprised of what I am doing." The board may be informed about the names and qualifications of candidates and pending choices for administrative positions in order to get members' reactions before final decisions and public announcements are made.

"But the board is not involved in interviews of candidates or in the screening process," the superintendent said. This practice—of "consulting" the board on pending recommendations for appointments but not having the board participate in the actual selection process—probably prevails in the large majority of districts, this superintendent believes.

Hentges said employment of administrators is a "political process" because they interact so much with the public, which is exposed to the district as an institution most often through them. Therefore, they often are a surrogate for the schools in the public's eyes. So why wouldn't the board be highly concerned about these employees?

Finch said that "most smart superintendents get a feel if an appointment is going to fly or not and don't take a recommendation to the board they can't live with." He said he sometimes involves board members in the selection of key administrators and an area superintendent has even had members participate in the process of selecting principals.

Give advance notice

Schuerman said that before the announcement of an administrative appointment, the board is told ahead of time. "If three or four members were very concerned, it might influence me (in whether to make the announcement)," he said. "It's important for the board to know what is going on. I suppose

"I've had situations in the past where some board members have tried to push certain people (to be hired). Where it becomes a pattern, it becomes a formula for trouble."

How One Superintendent Views His and the Board's Roles

The school board's responsibilities:

- To select and evaluate the superintendent. This is the single most important task the board undertakes.
- To engage in strategic planning, including setting goals and approving strategies for achieving the goals.
- To evaluate district progress toward the goals and to monitor the assessment of curricular programs.
- To serve as an early-warning system by providing the superintendent with feedback from the community on anything that might affect the schools. In other words, to mark the potholes in the road.
- To help the superintendent succeed in a partnership arrangement.
- To serve as a highly-visible cheerleader for the district to the community.

The superintendent's responsibilities:

- To assist the board in establishing the vision for the district and in maintaining the focus of the organization on the goals embodied in that vision.
- To hire and evaluate the district staff through a process of delegation and accountability.
- To remove any roadblocks to success of students, schools and staff by assessing the performance of the whole organization and promoting strong relationships between the schools and the community.
- To advise the board on the adoption of policies and when policy changes are needed.
- To provide assessment data to the board for monitoring progress and to recommend any mid-course changes in strategies to reach goals.
- To be an advocate for students and to assure that student needs are considered ahead of the needs of the organization.

—Joseph T. Hentges, superintendent, Woodstock, Illinois, Community Unit School District 200.

it is (involvement in administration) but it's their district and (the appointees) are probably going to be here long after I am."

Grosse said her contract gives her responsibility for all assignments but "I always let the board know ahead of time so they can be more supportive. "It's not can I do it, but what is the smoothest way. Once in a while they might know some pertinent information of which I am unaware. There's no question it is the role of the superintendent; however, I try not to operate in a vacuum."

Karol said he asks for the board's advice on occasion when he is considering several people for a position and is unsure of his choice. "I often fish to get their feeling," he said. "The law gives me that authority, but I'm reluctant to appoint someone they would be negative about."

Spillane said he sometimes invites board members to see the credentials of candidates. "In one case, they raised some questions," he said. "They had found out things I didn't know. It was an asset." Spillane said he is prepared to change his recommendation on a personnel action if board members have substantive reasons to do so.

Limits on involvement

There is a limit, however, to how far boards should get into personnel or other aspects of administration, superintendents say. "Boards are made up of lay people, schools are organizations," Hentges said. "They don't always have

the time, the experience or expertise to run an organization. The CEO ought to have specialized skills required to operate it well."

Finch said it is "the same reason that the superintendent is not involved in building decisions. You monitor them but keep your hands out of it. People closest to the operation are in the best position to make the decisions."

Several superintendents remarked that accountability is weakened if not destroyed if boards were to take a big hand in the appointment of personnel while superintendents are responsible for supervising, evaluating and disciplining the same personnel. The allegiance would be to the board, they say, and the superintendent's authority would be compromised.

"If the perception is that accountability is to the board and not the superintendent, then you've got a problem," Gosling said. Grosse said it would be impossible to hold the superintendent accountable for employees he or she did not recommend because the superintendent would have had no control over their qualifications to be hired. "There would be no organizational integrity," she said.

Payzant said the main problem with boards deciding whom to hire is that the superintendent is responsible for the performance of an individual in whom he may not have full confidence. And the individual may not feel fully answerable to the superintendent because he was selected by the board, which could undermine the superintendent's authority over that individual.

People simply cannot "serve two masters" effectively, Buchanan said.

Curriculum and instruction

As a rule, there is less involvement of boards in instructional and curriculum management, superintendents say. One reason, Parker said, is because more and more, those decisions are being made by teachers, principals and parents at schools. Another is that so much of the academic program entails policy, which is the responsibility of boards, and relatively little has to do with implementation.

When boards do intercede in administrative decisions, superintendents say, it usually is on issues that have attracted high public interest, and sometimes it is at the behest of superintendents themselves. It's a matter of making sure they have the board's support on what usually is a political issue. On those occasions, superintendents typically make certain board members are fully informed on details, and the result often is a shared decision, even if it appears in public that the board had simply supported an otherwise routine administrative action.

More subtle, Crowson said, is the behind-the-scenes decision making on instructional matters. "Superintendents say they used to make a recommendation, the board would discuss it and adopt," he said. "Now they have to give a number of alternative recommendations and a good deal more information."

A foot in the door?

Some superintendents who see sharp lines between policy and administration roles may fear that if boards are allowed a measure of involvement, it might open the flood gates to runaway interference in their domains. "There may be a danger where people (boards and superintendents) have not talked through their relationship," Gosling said. "If they are together, there's not a lot of danger."

Don Ingwerson, superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, said, "Most boards appreciate the respect you show them (by involving them). I've never found anybody taking over a district by sharing (power) with them."

Buchanan said there "may have been a time when it was inappropriate, but we now are in a participatory democracy, boards have changed and we don't have a choice of board involvement." Yet, he said, there still is a line between roles and responsibilities, however faint and unfixed, and most of his colleagues would undoubtedly agree. "If I recommended an appointment and the board rejected it and made its own selection, that would be going over the line. But I could accept their telling me to come back with another recommendation."

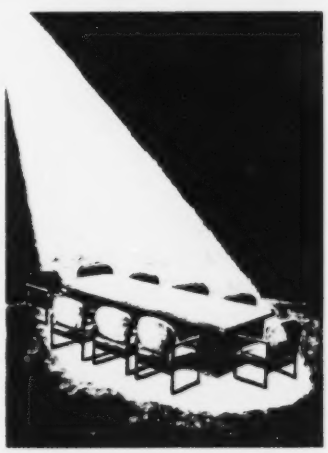
Karol feels the key to successful involvement of boards lies in how the superintendent approaches it. "The board needs to know you (the superintendent) are only seeking advice and not asking them to make the decision," he emphasized. "And that no one has a corner on the brain market."

CHAPTER THREE

The Tenure of Superintendents:

Is It Dropping, and Why?

Recent headlines in newspapers and trade publications have caught a lot of eyes in the education profession. Here is what they said: the average tenure of big-city superintendents has dropped to 2½ years.



For many, this decline in tenure was seen as a bellwether for the nation, conjuring up an image of superintendents losing their jobs right and left across the country. Since school boards do the hiring, it seemed logical to assume that school boards were doing a lot of firing to account for that drop-off. And if all that firing of superintendents was going on, then relations between boards and superintendents must really be bad.

More than anything, those headlines and the resulting inferences generated renewed attention to board-superintendent relationships, and raised numerous questions:

- Does the 2½-year figure indicate a significant drop in the tenure of urban superintendents?
- Why have big-city superintendents been leaving their jobs after relatively short periods in office?
- If there has been a drop, does it reflect a similar decline in tenure of superintendents outside the cities?
- Does it represent worsening relations between chief executives and their employers, school boards?

The facts on tenure

A 1991 story in *Education Week* about the tenure drop left an impression that the superintendency was in trouble nationwide. But, in fact, the figures on superintendents' tenure nationally do not show a downward trend, and are significantly different for the cities and the rest of the country.

Data compiled by the Council of Great City Schools showed, in fact, that the average time spent in office for superintendents of the 49 largest school districts is about 2½ years, probably the lowest in history. But the tenure of superintendents in general is about 6.4 years, according to AASA's 10-year *Study of the American School Superintendency* published in 1992.

"Opinions and Status of AASA Members," another AASA report, showed that the average tenure of superintendents nationwide has fluctuated over the last two decades but has remained fairly stable. It was 6 years in 1971, 7 years in 1974-75, 5.6 in 1982, 8 in 1989-90, and 6 in 1990-91.

AASA's 10-year study observed that the average tenure of 5.6 years in 1982 was lower than before or after probably because "during the 1970s and early 1980s, many districts were undergoing declining enrollments, which often resulted in budget cuts and staff dismissals, both prime factors in changing superintendents." Once that unstable period passed, the average tenure rose again.

In the cities, the average tenure of superintendents has been about 2½ years for about five years and does not represent a sudden drop, Samuel Husk, former executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, said in an interview. That figure, however, is the lowest on record, and reflects a long-term trend downward over the past two to three decades, he added.

Husk said big-city tenure was probably around 4 years in the mid-1970s, which itself was a sharp decrease from the

previous two decades when the large majority of these superintendents were retiring after lengthy careers on the job—an almost unheard of "happy ending" in big-city districts today.

Reasons for turnover

In recent years, some superintendents have been fired by boards, as newspaper headlines attest, but "a lot are being forced out now, often for political reasons," Husk said. "Five or six years in the job at most is all many can really do in the current situation. At that point, the superintendent's energy may be exhausted. It's a 24-hour-a-day job, the demands are so great and they're in the public eye all the time. The superintendent of schools is the lightning rod for practically anything that happens in the community."

In many urban districts, "there is a rising demand for results, and the superintendent is being held accountable for the failure to meet intensified demands," Husk said. Probably the biggest contributing factor over the last 20 years has been demographic changes and the accompanying political shifts, he said. "[City] schools have been faced with a changing population. No longer are they serving a middle-class population. There are more disadvantaged students, more social needs, which make the job more difficult."

In some cases, he said, there has been pressure to make way for greater numbers of minorities in the superintendency. In others, "boards have been ahead of superintendents in sensing what the school system needs." In the area of school-site decision making, for example, "some superintendents resist or want to move gradually and don't recognize there is a strong movement toward that kind of model."

Nature of the job

In short, Husk said, the reasons for superintendent turnover in the cities are multiple, some justifiable, some clearly not, and some stemming from the seemingly intractable nature of the job.

In 1991, approximately 30 school boards governing some of the nation's largest school systems replaced their superintendents, according to "Urban Dynamics," a new report of the National School Boards Association. "Some of these vacancies were due to retirements, others to new opportunities and upward mobility; but most were attributable to the pressures of an extraordinarily stressful job," the report said.

Based on a survey of urban board members and superintendents, the report said the two main reasons these boards gave for removing superintendents were "displeasure with the superintendent's leadership skills or superintendent conflicts with the board." The main factors that superintendents gave for their removal was the "political agenda of individual board members," followed closely by "board micromanagement/inexperienced board."

Short tenure expected

A new study to try to learn more about the abbreviated tenure of big-city superintendents is being conducted by Professor Marilyn L. Grady of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln. Many of the 23 superintendents she has interviewed said that a short stay on the job has become a fact of life and it is expected, if not always accepted. "They said, 'We perceive ourselves as change agents and we don't expect to stay for very long,'" she reported. "Some run just ahead of being fired."

By contrast, "in rural districts, superintendents are clearly getting fired and clearly for such things as mismanagement or community gaffes or for not fitting in with community values," Grady said. But those are not the issues with big city superintendents. They often feel they have to make career decisions to move because they knew they were finished in the jobs they held. "They had a special sense of whether it was time to move on."

Two to three years in the job—reflecting their actual average tenure—seemed to be too short, but three to four years was considered acceptable by them, she said.

Politics and diversity

The reasons they gave for having to move on centered mainly on politics and diversity. "They talked a lot about politics being out of control," she said. "Tneir view was that political factions are so divided and so active that it is difficult to keep the political interests in balance and to keep the individual representatives from these factions together on the board. There are so many different values and different needs of the children and their parents that it is hard to find a middle course amid all this diversity."

The diversity, Grady said, reflects "cultural issues that are played out in school districts. Groups are becoming more empowered, more active and permanent. As these cultural groups become stronger and more in number, what they want seems to differ more and more." The upshot often is competition among the groups for district resources.

Each cultural group is seeking to have its customs and heritage preserved through the schools, as these superintendents see it, and just "how to make that a positive force for school districts" is an elusive goal, she said.

Somewhat surprisingly, Grady said the superintendents have expressed little concern over whether their relatively short tenure has a detrimental effect on school improvement and student achievement. "It may be that big-city superintendents feel so far removed from the children that they don't see a direct impact on them," she said.

Different outside cities

Outside the big cities, tenure is a different story. The AASA 10-year *Study of the American School Superintendency*, conducted by Professor Thomas E. Glass of Northern Illinois University, pointed out that "a common theme in the popular media is that of a board and superintendent falling into conflict and the superintendent being fired," and as a result "the superintendency is often portrayed by the press as a position with a high turnover rate." This happens "because the firing of a superintendent attracts a great deal of attention in the media. Relatively few firings can create an impression that many superintendents are fired each year, which is not true," the study reported.

With the exception of large cities, the study continued, "the superintendency is not a highly transitory position." Most spend about 15 years as superintendents in no more than three districts. The latest survey, the report said, shows that "approximately three-fourths of the nation's superintendents have been in their current position for at least five or six years." The NSBA report agreed: 74 percent of the urban superintendents it surveyed had been on the job for five years or longer.

The AASA report said this consistency over the last decade "probably is due to increased district stability, the economic concerns of changing employment, working spouses, and being locked into non-transferable state retirement programs."

Longest in suburbs

The 1992 10-year study also found that the national average tenure of superintendents varied according to the size of the district. It was 5.4 years in districts above 25,000 enrollment and an even 5 years in districts with 300 or fewer students. It was the longest—7 years—in districts between 300 and 3,000 enrollment, and the next longest—6.6 years—in districts between 3,000 and 25,000 enrollment. In other words, tenure is longest in the medium-sized suburban districts.

These findings demonstrate that while a good deal of stability remains in the superintendency, it varies among districts according to diversity, local conditions, and other factors in addition to size. The data also show that there is surprising commonality in general across most school districts outside the biggest cities, both in the tenure of superintendents, the pressures that affect their time in office and the factors that cause them to leave.

Superintendents were asked why they had left their last superintendency, and most—about 43 percent—said the reason was to assume a position in a bigger district with higher pay and more responsibility. "Conflict with board members" ranked second at about 17 percent. But among superintendents in districts with fewer than 300 students, most—30 percent—cited board conflict, with 18 percent saying it was to move to a larger district. This indicates that conflict between boards and superintendents can be a serious problem in rural areas as well as in the cities.

NSBA Survey Identifies 'Destabilizing Factors'

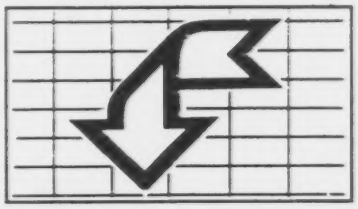
Urban school board members and superintendents are in close agreement on what destabilizes their relationship: parties who don't understand differences in their roles, members with "personal agendas" and poor communications. This is one of the findings of "Urban Dynamics," a report of the National School Boards Association published in 1992. It surveyed urban boards and superintendents on reasons behind the turnover of superintendents in their areas.

Here is how *board members* ranked destabilizing factors in order of importance:

- Members not understanding role differences.
- Poor communications.
- Personal agendas of board members.
- Distrust.
- Lack of clearly defined goals.

Here is how *superintendents* ranked destablizing factors:

- Personal agendas of board members.
- Members not understanding role differences.
- Poor communications.
- Distrust.



The report said "both groups agree that individual board members frequently represent special interests in the community in such a way that it is sometimes difficult for the school board to act in a corporate manner." They also agree that there often is no common understanding where the lines between policy and administrative roles are drawn, it said.

In addition, they shared the view that other lesser destabilizing factors stemmed from the media focusing on negative and minority position votes on boards, and boards expecting significant results too quickly from programs and initiatives undertaken by school districts.

Pressures on superintendents

In interviews with superintendents, board members, consultants, and university professors for this Critical Issues Report, there was wide agreement on one point: although the pressures on big-city superintendents are undoubtedly more intense and complex, these same pressures are being felt to varying degrees elsewhere. Their perception is that there may be a bigger turnover than the statistics bear out and that more superintendents may be closer to the edge than in the past.

Consultant James Huge sees a trend toward shortened tenures of superintendents in areas outside the cities. "It's not as dramatic as in the cities, but there are pockets of it," he said. "It is often related to conflict on the board, reflected from a community divided on an issue, with the superintendent caught in the middle," he said. Another consultant, Karl Plath, agreed, saying "the urban and suburban districts are experiencing many of the same problems."

This chapter will focus on the particular pressures that affect tenure in the superintendency. Chapters 4 and 5 will cover the internal as well as external factors that contribute to a rise in tensions between boards and superintendents, which may or may not result in a new superintendent.

The same problems

Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo said the problem stems from boards in rural areas, small towns, suburbs and cities "all coming under political pressures." It reaches "a different level in the cities," he said. "More aggressive, more sophisticated, more vicious—because of their lack of resources, their decaying infrastructures, the shifts in demographics. I find it much more difficult today to find a [city] board operating as a coherent whole."

Superintendent Thomas Payzant of the San Diego City School District said the issues confronting all districts are similar, differing only in scale. In the urban areas, he said, pressures grow out of the "increasing complexity of the job, expanding expectations of schools, the necessity for

schools to deal with social and economic issues in addition to the educational issues. So many people are looking for a quick fix. There is a real gap between what people expect and what the superintendent can deliver."

Former superintendent and consultant Kenneth Peters said he believes that often suburban and urban superintendents "get caught up in the issues of the larger cities that they are in or near." If a superintendent in a city district is targeted over an issue, it may well hit the agendas of surrounding boards because of media coverage and a spillover effect on community concerns.

Preservice training cited

Superintendent Jerry Parker of the suburban Pekin School District No. 108 near Peoria, Illinois, blamed superintendent firings partly on the lack of preservice training programs "to cope with the desire of boards for greater participation" in shared decision making.

Superintendent James Buchanan of the Tempe Union High School District in Arizona said that outside the cities, "We also are seeing a decline in tenure, although maybe not as dramatic, from the failure to commit to a long-term improvement process." It's a question not only of sufficient funding, but "whether the board can go with a long ride" to achieve long-range goals. "It takes time to impact on kids," he said.

William Soult, a board member in the St. Vrain Schools in Longmont, Colorado, said it "certainly is receiving more notoriety in the cities, but in general there seems to be a reduction in tenure nationwide." In Colorado, he said, the tenure of superintendents is less than four years for all districts. Fast-moving changes are occurring in some districts, he said, and if problems develop, the superintendent often gets the blame.

Superintendents are targets

Mary Jason, a board member in the East Jordan Public Schools in East Jordan, Michigan, said she sees a tendency for communities today to zero in on the superintendent when problems arise. "Instead of seeing the superintendent as part of the solution, they see him as part of the problem," she said. "The minute something goes wrong, his support seems to wane. As a result, the superintendent winds up leaving as much as being fired."

Sammy Quintana, a board member in the Pojoaque Valley Independent School District near Santa Fe, New Mexico, said the turnover of superintendents in New Mexico in recent years has been "tremendous." He attributed that mainly to a new kind of board member who is more questioning and demanding and also the lack of training of superintendents to deal effectively with changing board members and their communities.

But everyone agrees that the urban pressures are almost in another league. "The urban problems are mind-boggling," said Milt Goldberg, director of the Office of Research in the U.S. Department of Education.

In the urban areas, Payzant said, "the role has changed dramatically. No longer is it dealing only with instruction and curriculum, which traditionally has been at the center of schooling. Now it deals with community relations, conflict resolution, labor relations, budget and finance, the political process in the state capital and more."

High expectations

Floretta Dukes McKenzie, a consultant and former Washington, D.C., superintendent, said because turnover among big-city superintendents is high, vacancies are at a record level, in large part because of what she considers to be the unrealistic expectations of school boards and political leaders.

"Boards still describe the persons that they want in the superintendency as people who can walk on water," she said. "There's nobody alive who can meet the composite characteristics they demand." Her comments were reported in "Sounding Board," a newsletter of the U.S. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, and were made at a conference of the Urban Superintendents' Network in 1991.

"I'm not sure an educator is the kind of person who is going to succeed at the job because he has to be such a political animal," consultant William Mahoney said. "Election by ward has made it impossible, and the militancy of unions has also been important. The superintendent's energies as educator get so dissipated that there isn't much you can do."

Board members as politicians

A big part of the problem facing urban superintendents is the politicization of school boards, says David A. Bennett, former superintendent of the St. Paul, Minnesota,

Boards still describe the persons that they want in the superintendency as people who can walk on water....

Public Schools. Today, he said, "many urban school board members are best described as pure politicians" and have gotten elected for the sake of holding "political" office. "This kind of board member does not evidence any special interest in education above and beyond elected service in any political office," he wrote in the *American School Board Journal* in 1991.

Professor Frederick M. Wirt of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said with the unmet demands on schools "comes the increasing costs of popular criticism that make the superintendent a lightning rod for turbulent school politics." They are no different from other public officials, elected or appointed, who are targets of what he calls "the revolt of the client" in society.

"As superintendents find all the time, they lack any natural constituency in the community which they can mobilize in their political struggle," he said. "So they are expendable because they provide a convenient scapegoat for all the complaints that the public has about schooling today." In general, he added, "this pressure is simply a reflection of the growing participation of citizens in their decision making about services."

Fire the coach

Husk sees the same thing happening in the cities—"the rising demand for results and superintendents being held accountable for failure to meet intensified demands."

But "many of the problems that superintendents face are not really resolvable by them," he continued. "Teacher contracts, inequity of resources and expenditures, lack of family support of education, opposition of taxpayers, the imposition of external mandates—all are only marginally manipulable by this professional. But each problem is a source of grievance by some public in the

Lessons for Board Members and Superintendents

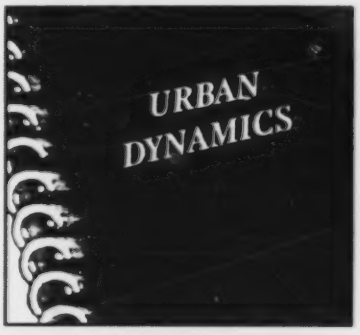
"Urban Dynamics" is a report by the National School Boards Association that examined the reasons underlying what it said was the high rate of resignations and job terminations of large-city superintendents in 1991. From that effort and a survey of 100 members on 55 urban school boards and 71 superintendents of districts with enrollments between 10,000 and 400,000 students, the report drew these lessons:

For board members

- Institute regular and systematic board self-evaluations.
- Set and adhere to superintendent recruitment and evaluation criteria and maintain strict confidentiality during these processes.
- Develop school board policies for media relations.
- Be wary of unproductive political pressures, while responding to constituent concerns.
- Review lines of communication with superintendent and staff.
- Define scope of school board role, including fiscal and all other elements of strict accountability to the people of the district.
- Develop tactics to diffuse anger and deal effectively with controversy.

For superintendents

- The ability to manage people is the most important asset.
- Develop effective communication skills.
- Keep communication lines open to all members of the school board.
- Develop strategies for effecting change, including process skills.
- Resist political pressure while responding to concerns of school board and constituents.
- Develop tactics to diffuse anger.
- Deal openly with confrontation and confront when appropriate.
- Be willing to take risks.
- Understand that school boards are part of the American institution of representative government and are directly accountable to the people of the school district whom they represent.



community, and each seeks to get the system to deal with it. If it cannot, then blame is sought, and the most visible—not the same as most blameworthy—js the superintendent.

"The public may sense that changing the office holders may actually do little to change things—rather like changing coaches on chronically losing sports teams. But the exercise of public power in a democracy requires some accountability for its use. Frequent changes of boards through elections, and of superintendents through appointments, satisfy that popular sense of making someone responsible for what goes on. Principals are too local, and teachers are too diffuse as a group, to remove and replace, and the state is too far away to influence.

"But the superintendent is visible across the community," Husk concluded, "a clear and singular target for displacing community frustration over a host of schooling matters."

Heller said the sports analogy is appropriate. "The superintendent is to the board what the coach is to the team," he said. "They don't fire the board. The superintendent is the one always to go." Barbara Wheeler, a board member in the Community High School District No. 99 in Downers Grove, Illinois, added that "I've never seen a board stand up and say, 'It's our fault.' They just say we're going to get a new superintendent."

Preparation lacking

Robert Spillane, superintendent of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools, has a different view. "Many superintendents have been ill-prepared for the job," he said. In the cities, some superintendents have been picked as "role models," he said. "The big issue is what kind of experiences have they had," Spillane said. "Some were victims of politics but of those who were not successful, preparation has been lacking in some cases. They haven't gone through the jobs leading up to the superintendency. They have been fast-rising stars, which is a new phenomenon. In the 1960s and 1970s, most of the big-city superintendents worked their way up the line."

Consultant Richard Foster agreed. In the cities, he said, "a lot of people are being selected as superintendent because they are minority but many are not ready for the job" because they lack sufficient experience in top administrative positions. Minority school administrators have difficulties being chosen for the superintendency so they "have to take on the toughest job first"—in the cities—in order to get a chief executive's position, he said.

Neither Foster nor Husk believe that white superintendents are ousted very often just to hire a minority person. In fact, Husk said, more black superintendents have been hired in recent years because more black administrators have gained the background and experience to qualify them for the position.

Urban training

Several efforts are under way to equip prospective superintendents with the skills needed to attack urban school problems. The latest was launched in 1992 by a consortium composed of the Institute for Educational Leadership, the Joint Center for Economic and Political Studies and the McKenzie Group. Called "Superintendents Prepared," it is designed to train up to 30 superintendent candidates a year through tailor-made programs and internships.

Other urban superintendency programs are being offered by Harvard University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign's National Center for School Leadership, which has formed the National Commission on the Urban Superintendency.

The retirement option

Some believe that age and mobility are factors that tend to push the average tenure of superintendents down. Underwood said some older superintendents have been retiring, and many more will be in the 1990s. He said others with 25 years on the job have been moving to superintendencies in other states where they perhaps have previous experience to add to their retirement benefits. But he estimated that only 20 percent at most of superintendents who have left their positions recently did so for these reasons.

AASA's 10-year study showed that with a median age of 50 and early retirement available at age 55 in many states, a majority of superintendents may be retiring in the 1990s. But the study found little evidence that either age or mobility has had a significant impact on tenure rates.

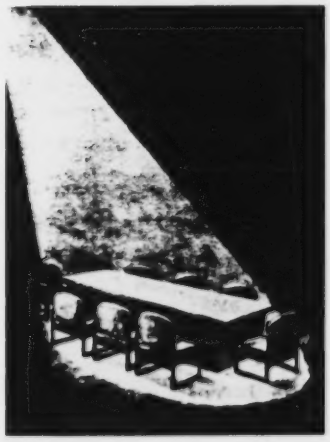
Considering the foregoing, sometimes the prognosis for American superintendents, especially in the cities, sounds bleak. The evidence, however, is overwhelming that the vast majority of boards and superintendents work together well and produce effective school programs. The ways they build those relationships will be examined in Chapters 8 and 9.

CHAPTER FOUR

Tensions Between Boards and Superintendents:

Are They Rising?

The 1982 AASA *Study of the American School Superintendency* found "increased evidence of tension between boards and superintendents" and saw reason to view it with "serious concern." Today, the evidence seems to show that tension certainly hasn't abated, and may be growing.



In fact, a broad array of survey findings, expert analysis and opinions of superintendents, board members and others all indicate that while the relationships remain solid by and large, board-superintendent tensions have risen in recent years. The question is, what kind of tension? And an even more important question is, why? Answers are important because understanding the sources of the tension can open the way for action to improve relationships.

The evidence gathered for this Critical Issues Report helps answer some key questions. Does tension mean conflict? It can, of course, but open conflict is clearly the exception rather than the rule in school districts across the nation. Does it mean growing hostility between boards and superintendents? Probably no. Does it mean more strain between boards and superintendents? Probably yes. Does the evidence point to increasing pressures on boards and superintendents in the future—pressures that intensify those strains and tensions? Definitely.

Evidence of tensions

Let's examine the evidence:

• Board presidents and superintendents responding to a Critical Issues survey for this book indicated tensions have increased between them. Asked if job pressures have risen, superintendents and board members both answered "yes" overwhelmingly. Both groups also cited the states— their demands on schools coupled with lack of adequate funding to meet those demands—as the main source of those pressures. But superintendents also identified boards as significant sources of those pressures. Board presidents did not link superintendents to the pressures but ranked "keeping board members informed" near the top of concerns about the board-superintendent relationship. In interviews, many said mounting pressures on

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boards typically were passed on to superintendents. For this and other reasons, both groups also said they must work hard to keep their relationships strong and healthy.

• The 1992 version of AASA's *Study of the American School Superintendency* found growing concern among superintendents over the extent to which board members understand and fulfill their roles. In 1982, superintendents ranked role fulfillment fourth among problems facing board members and ranked it second in 1992. Confusion over roles as a source of tension was discussed here in Chapters 1 and 2.

• The study also offered evidence of a shift in the policy-initiation role, a key leadership responsibility. In a question that asked "who takes the lead in developing policy?" about 73 percent of the superintendents said they did in 1982 compared with only about 67 percent in the 1992 report. About 25 percent of the superintendents attributed the policy lead to "shared responsibility" with the board in the 1992 report, compared with about 22 percent in 1982. This shift away from superintendents as the policy leaders and toward shared policy making is the right way to go, most agree, but the change it reflects may produce friction as a spinoff.

• As the chief administrative officers of school boards, superintendents traditionally have been responsible for the preparation of agendas for board meetings. And, of course, that responsibility can mean considerable influence over what boards discuss and consider. In 1982, 82 percent of the superintendents participating in the AASA survey said they prepared the meeting agendas, but in 1992 that number dropped to about 76 percent. And about 16 percent attributed it to "shared responsibility" in 1982, compared with 22 percent in 1992. Again, this shift may indicate more board assertiveness over its business agenda, which could create more tension.

Individually, the survey findings are not definitive, but together they suggest a trend toward a more vigorous assertion of the board's role in school leadership. More important, the survey data seem to confirm what those working in and around school districts report is actually taking place—more tension between boards and superintendents in general.

Multiple factors

The sources of the tensions are scattered widely and go beyond apparent board assertiveness alone. Some of the reasons are obvious, like inadequate school funding, which has reached unprecedented levels in some states. Others are less visible, such as a lack of skills on the part of board members as well as superintendents in developing strong relationships. The reasons vary in different parts of the nation to varying degrees, making it impossible to narrow them down to a few. The evidence really points to multiple factors, but several broad categories stand out, based on the perceptions of people in and around districts, and they will be explored at length.

To do so, the evidence for this Critical Issues Report has been divided into two parts, although there is necessarily some overlap. In this chapter, the internal factors that affect board-superintendent relations will be explored. In the next chapter, external factors, such as inadequate financing of schools, changing social conditions and political currents, will be examined. In both groups, some are new and some have a long history. And when combined with one another, they go a long way in explaining—in a practical sense—why some boards and superintendents have problems working productively together.

The internal factors involve largely what boards and superintendents do or don't do to get along well. Remember the point that was made in Chapter 1: there is an inherent lack of clarity about the roles and responsibilities of boards and superintendents, which will probably never be overcome. Honest differences are bound to result, in spite of the most sincere and well-meaning efforts toward cooperation. Tension and friction can be the products of frustration in the search for mutual accommodation as much as a clash of wills.

Sit down and talk

One major source of trouble between boards and superintendents is their failure to engage in thorough discussions about their roles. That, in turn, can lead to a fundamental failure to reach understandings—whether verbal or written—about such roles. A lack of understanding about roles only serves to exacerbate the built-in confusion already surrounding them. Consultants who advise boards and superintendents with relationship problems say this happens all the time.

"Very few boards and superintendents talk about what is expected of each other," consultant Jim Huge said. "That is the origin of a lot of problems."

Everett J. Williams, superintendent of the New Orleans Public Schools, said some areas of the relationship require flexibility, but "to decide what areas they are, boards and superintendents need to sit down and talk about where flexibility should occur. Yes, tension is rising, and the main cause is when superintendents fail to sit with boards and talk about flexibility."

Different perceptions

The result can often be different perceptions and as-

sumptions about what they can or should do to fill their roles. Should a board, for example, pass judgment on the details of a new instructional program recommended by the superintendent to implement a board policy? Should a superintendent propose a policy for board adoption with little or no time allowed for review and possible modification by board members? There is no way of answering if the board and superintendent have not discussed their roles in such situations.

It is easy to see in these examples how dissatisfaction could arise if the superintendent assumed that the instructional program involved administrative prerogatives outside the scope of board responsibilities, and if the board thought the superintendent was usurping its policy making role by effectively excluding the board from the policy formulation process. But maybe not—if both sides had agreed in advance that these activities were perfectly proper as part of their roles.

A survey of school boards by the Institute for Educational Leadership found that board members themselves believe that this is one of the areas in which boards are least effective. IEL's Jacqueline P. Danzberger said the survey showed a "remarkable unanimity among all boards"—urban, suburban and rural/small—about their "lack of processes to resolve conflicts with their superintendents" and a "lack of a common definition of the role of the board among board members."

The communication factor

Discussing roles comes under the broad rubric of what is often referred to as communication between boards and superintendents. Given the fact that they are forced to share power and collaborate in decision making, communication should be a top priority and one of their strengths. But it isn't always so.

A breakdown in communication can occur if one member receives information from the superintendent that others do not get, and if it isn't addressed by the superintendent and board, it can be the germ of a problem. Huge said. "It's incredible how often this occurs."

Michael Usdan, president of IEL, said if "communications were better we wouldn't have the turnover in superintendents we have. It's the source of a lot of tension."

"I heard one superintendent say, 'I never talk to individual board members. I want to treat the board as an entity,'" said consultant Kenneth Underwood. That impedes good personal communications, which is vital to building solid relationships with individual members, he added.

If communications were better, we wouldn't have the turnover in superintendents we have. It's the source of a lot of tension.

Time on task

Superintendents and boards often claim they pay a lot of attention to communications between them, but questions have been raised about how much time is actually spent on it.

Especially when new board members take office, superintendents should discuss board-superintendent roles, said Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo. "The superintendent should inform the rest of the board that he plans to sit down and talk with the new members about their policy roles." Superintendents, he added, "have got to spend more time in dealing with boards because their members are constantly changing."

A study of Illinois superintendents by Professor Thomas E. Glass of Northern Illinois University revealed that about 36 percent of them spent one hour a week or less in direct contact with board members outside of meetings, another 36 percent spent one to two hours a week and 18 percent spent two to four hours a week. "Boards in Illinois have seven members, so if these superintendents spent four hours a week with them, that is less than 34 minutes a member," he said.

It could be that the surveyed superintendents felt they also were spending time effectively by communicating with board members indirectly, Glass said, but in any case, "it still doesn't seem like enough." It also is "very surprising since many superintendents indicate that communication and interaction with the board members is a key activity in their jobs," he wrote in summarizing the study's findings, which were published by the Illinois Association of School Administrators.

Many unprepared

Glass said the reason that superintendents don't do a better job on communications is that they come up through the educational system as teachers and administrators where a premium is not often placed on communicating with colleagues. Then when they become superintendents and communication is critical, they are unprepared because of the lack of experience at it and the lack of preservice training in both its importance and its techniques, he said.

"Communication is probably the thing that most superintendents who get into difficulty fall down on," said consultant William Mahoney.

If communication is so important, why would it get less than the attention it deserves? Superintendent Eugene Karol of the Calvert County Public Schools in Prince Frederick, Maryland, said in reality, "good communication is one of the most elusive skills to achieve." Face-to-face communication is clearly the best, but the fact is superintendents usually don't have the time to communicate with the board, the staff and the public in a personal way.

Complacency sets in

Time is a big factor, superintendent Art Gosling of the Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools said, but so is complacency. "You start to think that maybe members don't need to know," he said. "But it does consume a huge amount of time. And you need to protect the staff from having to respond to board members continually. You always are asking yourself, 'What do they need to know?'"

"It boils down to involvement and communications. It's not a question of who makes the decision but of keeping the other party informed."

"It's one area I have to keep working on," said Joseph Hentges, superintendent of the Woodstock, Illinois, Community Unit School District. "I become too familiar with the relationship and assume they board members know what is going on. It is easy to lose contact between meetings." Communication, he said, is a big part of the relationship. "Personal interaction is what makes the organization keep going."

Kenneth Peters, a retired superintendent and former consultant to districts, said superintendents should make sure they pass on relevant correspondence and other communications to boards in a timely manner, rather than allow it to accumulate in a package to be delivered just before meetings.

Keeping boards informed

Mary Jason, a board member of the East Jordan Public Schools in Michigan, and former president of the Michigan Association of School Boards, said boards and superintendents don't always keep each other informed and it causes problems. "Sometimes the superintendent gets too far out ahead of the board and vice versa," she said. "It boils down to involvement and communications. It's not a question of who makes the decision but of keeping the other party informed. That's a big part of the tension—when one or the other doesn't feel involved in the thought process."

If superintendents sometimes fail to keep boards adequately informed, it may be good grounds for suspicion that they are trying to manipulate board actions, superintendents and board members say.

Sometimes, Peters said, superintendents will hold back information and figure that "'when I meet with them eyeball to eyeball I'll give it all to them.' But by that time it may have been kicked around in the community and the damage is done." In other words, board members got the information elsewhere, and it may have looked to them like the superintendent had not been completely forthcoming.

Karol said a lot of "superintendents try to finesse

information and feed boards only things they want them to know, or they color things. They might take an issue, like a problem in a school, and make it sound different than it really is. When they get caught giving inaccurate information, they are finished."

The responsibility of superintendents to keep boards informed has been widely discussed in the past decade or more, and there seems to be little question that they are doing a much better job of it. The findings of the IEL survey revealed that "where once boards may have felt this was a problem with superintendents or staff, information now is more abundantly and freely given." The problem is that sometimes superintendents go "to the point of overwhelming the board with information."

The turf factor

But information flow is a two-way process, and how well superintendents and boards keep each other informed can be more of a symptom of a problem in relationships than a basic cause. The more fundamental problem can be traced back again to roles— roles that are inherently cloudy and are shifting today.

Chapter 2 looked at the dynamics of roles in theory and practice, and here we examine how those dynamics affect working relationships.

Boards are under pressure to play more active leadership roles and many are seeking to respond in a positive way. Lewis W. Finch, superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Golden, Colorado, said, "The roles of boards and superintendents are changing. We used to pretend there were clear roles, but there always was a fuzziness. Now that is being accentuated because board members feel a responsibility to be more active, involved and informed and sometimes the old boundaries are crossed."

It's "a sign of the times," Finch added, "but many of us are not used to that and don't know how to deal with it. Some say it is an invasion of our prerogatives as superintendents."

Giving up power

Professor Michael Kirst of Stanford University, who has helped direct studies that urged boards to play a greater policy-making role, said some superintendents "want to keep the policy role for themselves."

A lot of the conflict between boards and superintendents occurs when boards see themselves in a different role in policy making, Finch said. "They may resent the old relationship where the superintendent developed policy. They see themselves charged by people in the community with initiating policy, and they tend to want to start with a blank sheet of paper rather than react to what the superintendent has proposed. Of course, they want to include the superintendent in the dialogue since superintendents can have a great deal of impact because of their access to information. But I think this is healthy, although some superintendents view it as a terrible thing."

Thomas A. Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association, said some superintendents still "think they should be dominating boards, and that boards are there to approve what they are doing and to move the superintendents' agendas ahead."

"In the past, superintendents had a freer hand, more authority, and weren't questioned as much about their decisions," said Norbert Schuerman, superintendent of Omaha School District No. 1 in Nebraska. "But people expect to be involved more today. People are more educated, more sensitive to how their tax dollars are being spent; there is more talk about education in the community, and they want more information about what is being taught. If the superintendent is not sensitive to these things, neither the board nor the superintendent is going to be happy."

Shared decision making

Jerry Parker, superintendent of the Pekin School District No. 108 near Peoria, Illinois, said some superintendents "don't understand the emerging practices of human interaction in shared decision making. A lot of superintendents don't understand power and never exercised it. To share it, you have to understand it."

Barbara Wheeler, a board member in the Community High School District No. 99 in Downers Grove, Illinois, said she thinks "a lot of superintendents who were successful under the old system don't do well today when boards don't always accept what they say."

Consultant Carroll Johnson said in his long experience, "the main reason a superintendent ultimately is fired is because the board feels it has been preempted by the superintendent."

Perceived board encroachment

If some superintendents still try to limit the board's role, there also apparently are board members who attempt to encroach on the superintendents' administrative role. Survey results as well as interviews for this Critical Issues Report provide considerable evidence for this view by

superintendents. The concern expressed by superintendents over how well boards understand and fulfill their roles—picked up in AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency*—seems to support this perception. The extent to which board members "understand the appropriate board role" was ranked second by superintendents among problems they face. Finance issues were ranked first.

Superintendents surveyed by Glass for the Illinois Association of School Administrators said the second most common cause of board conflict could be found in "boards trying to manage the district." It was close behind "responding to community concerns" as the main cause. The report said interference by boards in management functions "has been a constant source of conflict for many years."

Concern over this issue also was reflected in a survey of superintendents conducted by Virginia Tech and the *American School Board Journal*, which sought to identify the points of contention with boards. In discussing the survey, a *Journal* article described the feelings of some superintendents this way:

"Board members now, in greater numbers than ever before, refuse to honor that hallowed but elusive line separating governance and management, policy and administration. As never before, board members are willing to invade the superintendent's domain. They're ready to 'micromanage' school affairs. They want, in a word, to meddle."

Point of agreement

"Urban Dynamics," a 1992 report of the National School Boards Association, found agreement in its survey of urban boards and superintendents that "board micromanaging activities are aimed at personnel and financial issues and that the pressure is generated by constituents."

The IEL report, meanwhile, found that among major problems identified by boards in working with superintendents, excessive board involvement in administrative matters was the most cited category. The overwhelming amount of information they must deal with was ranked second and a feeling of need for more board independence was third.

Consultant Ira Krinsky said board involvement in administration "is a legitimate complaint but is nothing new." The question is whether it has intensified, and the perception among many is that it has.

Karl Plath, another consultant, said that micromanagement by boards may still be the "exception to the rule," but there certainly is "more involvement of boards than in the past." "Superintendents always played the leadership role in policy development but boards now are getting into the superintendents' area."

Peters, whose career was spent in California, said, "Unfortunately, too many boards today, probably for political reasons, are running the whole show."

Superintendents give in

Heller said there is a "tendency of boards to meddle in administration" and sometimes "the superintendent allows it to happen. Some superintendents see it as a desirable thing to acquiesce to their boards," he said. "They think it is easier to give in to boards than to stand up to them. For boards, it is more fun to get involved in administration than to set policy."

One reason for this is that boards think their policy roles have shrunk. "Now, boards see their policy roles as restricted, not challenging, and want to get involved in implementation," Heller said. "It grows out of real frustrations of boards who have seen their policy powers eroded by encroachment by the state and federal governments."

More involvement wanted

It seems clear that "boards want to be more involved in the educational program," Hentges said. "I don't think that is bad but some superintendents are not prepared for that." William Soult, a board member of the St. Vrain Schools in Longmont, Colorado, said it is an outgrowth of the knowledge needed to serve as a board member today.

"The knowledge base is several time greater since I came on board (15 years ago)," he said. "It is especially true in curriculum and instruction. It changes our role in that more policy discussions are being held and more decisions are being made. Some of the decisions used to be in the superintendents' area, involving issues like testing of reading for outcome delivery. These have become policy questions now. Board agendas are more complex and very different now."

Professor Robert Crowson of the University of Illinois at Chicago said unannounced visits by board members to schools "drive superintendents crazy" and "create rifts in the organization." It happens, he said, "when a member picks up things from teachers or parents about a principal, runs back to the board and then the board asks the superintendent for an explanation."

Dwight Stevens, superintendent of the Stevens Point, Wisconsin, Public Schools, said that "board members walking into buildings giving orders confuses the operational procedures and runs counter to proper district management."

Personnel and power

Sometimes boards try to encroach on personnel decisions, an area that most superintendents guard jealously. The NSBA report said 80 percent of the superintendents it surveyed ranked personnel as the prime area boards want to "micromanage," while 60 percent of board members surveyed agreed that boards generally want to micromanage. Boards ranked budgets and spending higher than superintendents as issues they want to get into in greater detail.

"Boards are more inclined to become involved in personnel selection today," Huge said. "A lot of the time it results from new members coming on boards backed by community pressure to get rid of someone." Consultant George Raab agreed that boards are getting into personnel issues, saying it often stems from an effort to get "political supporters hired."

Williams said the New Orleans board for the first time "has indicated it wants to start hiring and firing" district

As the Schools Turn . . .

Horror at the Board Table

The following may sound like a TV soap opera in a school setting, but it did occur—unfortunately—in an urban West Coast school district.

It was close to being a textbook case of the roles that members of a school board should *not* play. These board members got into virtually everything they shouldn't have, and the superintendent did little to try to stop them.

The board in question was elected at large within the district, but it easily could have been mistaken for one elected by ward because of the way the members focused on their narrow interests. Four members were white and one was a minority person.

Single issue members

The board consisted of classic "single issue" members who tended to the interests of the region of the district where they lived and pursued issues that caught their fancies. They showed little concern for the district as a whole.

They argued and wrangled over minute details, blatantly traded votes to achieve their objectives, and fought in public. At a particularly acrimonious board meeting, one of the members became so enraged when the vote didn't go his way that he had to be removed from the chambers by security guards. Another member regularly "leaked" discussions from executive sessions to the local newspaper.

The board did agree on one thing, however, and that was meddling in administration. Administrators in the district sometimes wondered why the board had even bothered to hire a superintendent.

Who got hired

Board members' consuming interest appeared to be who got hired and what the person's ethnicity was.

They involved themselves in the selection of virtually everyone from senior staff to custodians. They made it clear they did not trust the superintendent's judgment on personnel, and they even said so in executive sessions. At first, a majority would simply reject the superintendent's recommendation and he would bring in a second recommendation, or a third, or a fourth, and so on. Finally, board members began reviewing applications and selecting new appointees themselves.

The result was many political appointments based on ethnicity. And board interference didn't stop there. The board protected those who got the jobs, interfering with the superintendent when he tried to hold employees accountable for their performances. In one flagrant case, a principal who often showed up for work around 11 a.m. and who was strongly suspected of taking illegal drugs was allowed to remain in his position because of board members' insistence.

In blatant violation of board rules, performance evaluations from executive sessions of the board were often slipped to some of these same

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employees. Several board members "wanted to sit in on interviews and some brought me names of people that they wanted me to hire," he said. "One told me who I should hire as my deputy. We have a rigorous personnel policy, which some board members want to go around. I would never allow that to occur but it has caused some conflict with the board."

One superintendent who asked not to be named said boards apparently want to be involved in personnel decisions because it "depicts power." As he put it, "If board members can provide jobs, then they get the power and it removes power from the superintendent. So who would the ones who got the jobs be loyal to?"

The Virginia Tech-NSBA survey found that personnel decisions are the biggest bone of contention between superintendents and boards. The two groups agreed that among 27 issues, personnel was, by far, the source of the greatest disagreement. Second was curriculum and instruction, third was administration and governance, and fourth financial management. "Superintendents say they

principals by several board members.

The board couldn't even unite around negotiations with employee groups. Some members breached the process and made "agreements" with union leaders on the side without the knowledge of the full board or the superintendent. These actions only served to create more acrimony in relations between the board and unions.

In addition, the superintendent and his staff were constantly answering phone calls from board members, carrying out their wishes and furnishing information, nearly all on trivial items

And then there were the meetings

The board agendas reflected an obsession with details. One staff member did nothing but work on agendas, which were voluminous and required board action on virtually every transaction and decision. Purchases of as little as $5 were action items. One board member routinely brought along a calculator to check the accuracy of staff reports during budget sessions.

Not surprisingly, board meetings, which started at 6:30 p.m., often dragged on past midnight. And although the board was scheduled to meet only twice a month, special meetings frequently were called to deal with the myriad details in which board members immersed themselves.

Policy? The board often held study sessions and ordered numerous reports from the staff on various issues, but rarely engaged in real policy formulation or review. The district had a board policy governing board responsibilities as well as operating procedures, but the current board showed no indication of knowing what was in it and never considered bringing it up to date.

The superintendent did little to change the way the board conducted itself for several reasons. He was in ill health and just wanted to keep his job rather than confront the problems. The board kept him on because he didn't interfere. In any case, factionalism on the board made it a daunting task for the superintendent to turn things around. But he didn't try, which allowed all kinds of improprieties to flourish. And the staff was not immune from improprieties either. One assistant superintendent routinely fed information to one board member (a personal friend), which only bred more internal strife.

Disastrous for students

This situation was disastrous for the students and the community in many ways. In particular, the district had a predominant and growing Hispanic and Asian-American student population but—unbelievable as it may seem—had no policy for bilingual education. For deficiencies like this, the district often was faced with threats of state funding cutoffs.

Student achievement in the district was among the lowest in the state and remained that way, but the board never discussed this embarrassing fact in public or even in executive session. A board initiative to improve student performance was never proposed, and although the superintendent on several occasions did propose new learning programs, they were voted down. Ultimately, the superintendent was fired at a late-night executive session—from which he had been excluded.

All in all, it was not soap opera as much as real tragedy. Of course, the conduct of this board and superintendent was not representative of American education, but germs of their "disease" exist in virtually every school district. This true story illustrates that it *can* happen, and how the interests of the students take a back seat when leadership breaks down.

want more authority in personnel matters; so do board members," the *American School Board Journal* article said. "And, by and large, board members are the more adamant about it."

Overall, the survey showed that superintendents and boards agree that their influence over personnel decisions is divided evenly. Although that seems high on the board's side, considering the importance that superintendents place on it as their responsibility, it may indicate that boards are more involved in personnel matters than assumed.

The survey also asked how superintendents and boards would alter that 50-50 division, which helps explain some of the tensions between them. Board members said they would like to reduce the authority of superintendents over personnel by about 15 percent, while superintendents want to increase their control of personnel decisions by 4 percent. This adds up to "an attitude gap of nearly 20 percent," the article said, which suggests that differences over personnel decisions may represent more than just isolated instances of friction.

Family and friends

On occasions, board members even attempt to get friends and relatives hired in their districts. "It's not prevalent," Heller said, "but it happens. School districts sometimes are the largest business and employers in town."

A survey of 310 superintendents in Nebraska discovered that frequently at the heart of conflict between boards and superintendents was the hiring of board members' relatives. The study, conducted by Professors Marilyn L. Grady and Miles T. Bryant of the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, and reported in the *School Administrator* magazine was aimed at pinpointing "turnover and turmoil in the lives of superintendents."

Fifty-eight percent of the superintendents said they had experienced a "critical incident" with a board member or the board, which most often involved their "family and friends." In these cases, it was not only the hiring or firing of relatives, but a variety of personal encounters that got in the way.

Frequently, superintendents said, the family/friends category involved board members' "children (being) banned from athletic participation because of poor grades or for disciplinary reasons," the report said. The behaviors of board members involved in these incidents included "threatening the superintendent, intimidating the coach, lobbying other board members, and, in one instance, having a coach terminated because [the board member's] daughter was not 'properly treated' on the basketball team," it said.

The superintendents reported that "board members also sought special treatment and favors for their children, such as waivers of dress codes, new basketball uniforms and trips to special conventions."

In incidents involving relatives of board members, a superintendent said he resigned after pressure created by a member whose wife had been fired by the superintendent for inadequate job performance. Another board member voted against the renewal of the superintendent's contract after the superintendent reduced the contract of the board member's wife—a teacher—to half time. In another incident, a board member resigned after his wife applied for a position with the district and was not hired.

Grady and Bryant said that even though the survey only covered Nebraska schools, the findings are probably representative of similar incidents that are experienced by superintendents in the other states.

Lack of skills

Of course, the origin of all these problems—board incursions into operations and superintendents trying to monopolize policy making—often is the utter lack of communication about roles and responsibilities. But it also stems from a lack of skills and understandings about what is required to make their relationship work well.

The fact is citizens often are elected and appointed to school boards with little or no knowledge about leadership, much less about how organizations like school districts function. And some educators reach the superintendency with limited exposure to the fundamental ideas behind board-superintendent roles, not to mention the need for effective communication skills. Who says so? Board members, superintendents and consultants—ex-superintendents with few exceptions—themselves.

In its 1986 report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership," IEL concluded that management, interpersonal, communications and leadership skills were essential for fulfillment of the board's policy role. Yet, "board members, former board members and community persons interviewed stated that, by and large, their boards of education, as corporate bodies, need development in these skills," the report said.

"Board members generally agreed they lacked preparation for board service," the report continued. "In essence, many newly elected or appointed members felt totally unprepared for their new responsibilities and unaware of the inordinate amount of time board membership entails." In the survey, they said they needed to be "more knowledgeable and better equipped to discharge their responsibilities."

How decisions are made

Specifically, board members said they "should learn how to function in a corporate body and understand how decisions are made in a group policy-making context," the IEL report said. "They should continuously assess the ever-touchy realm of board-superintendent relationships and develop sensitivity to the nuances of what is policy and what is administration in the public school decision making environment."

Danzberger of IEL added that boards are least effective in the governance skills that are necessary for school improvement, such as goal-setting, policy oversight, and assessment. Lacking these skills makes it all the more difficult to respond to public pressures for better schooling, contributing to board-superintendent tensions.

"Many people who run for the board never have any idea what it means to have to learn that role," Heller said. "They don't understand the policy making role." Often, new members "have the notion that the (school) system is not working but they don't understand where the pressure points are. They don't understand that the superintendent is the source of information and if they ask for data, they can influence the system."

Parker said he has found that candidates for the school board in his district have sometimes held the mistaken belief that the board represented the legislative branch and the superintendent the executive branch of school government—much like the legislative and executive branches of the federal government. In their mind, the board and superintendent should be expected to compete the way the federal branches do.

A different breed

In the past, more board members had some business background, consultant Vic Cottrell said. "Many had experience in running multimillion-dollar institutions like schools," he said. "But now they don't want to run. They don't want to take the heat from being a school board member because they think it will hurt their businesses."

Nowadays, Cottrell said, there are more "ex-teachers, social workers, small business people, homemakers, people who have been active in the community who are suddenly elected" to positions of leadership on school boards. The problem is a "lack of experience rather than lack of good intention," he said, and you have to help them develop while they are on the board."

Then, it is "seven or eight years before such a person recognizes what it means to run a multi-million dollar organization and by then they often are off the board," Cottrell said.

Richard D. Woolley, superintendent of the Sparkenhill School District in Poughkeepsie, New York, said the "boards of old were eager to learn and improve. Current boards really have such narrow issues. They do not wish to be confused with right and wrong."

Consultant Ira Krinsky said that "some board members have problems with the rapid ascension to power. They go through the election process and are thrust into a role requiring decisions on complex issues without much experience. It can be difficult and confusing." The result often is that instead of paying attention to policy development, these board members focus on administrative detail.

One dissenting voice is that of Professor Larry Cuban of Stanford University, who said he doesn't think board members are necessarily less qualified than in the past. He said the quality of board members has long been a complaint of administrators. The reluctance of citizens to serve on boards is a far more serious problem, Cuban added.

Board member training

There is general agreement that board members need improved training to provide effective leadership for the nation's schools. Based on its own survey, IEL said board members "expressed widespread support for more extensive and diverse training to make new members more knowledgeable and better equipped to discharge their responsibilities." NSBA has consistently voiced strong support for the availability of training for board members on a voluntary basis.

And the attendance of board members at training sessions, workshops and conference seminars has increased significantly in recent years. In 1992, 12 states required some kind of training for school board members.

But critics, such as IEL, say it is not enough, and, its survey showed, board members agree. Just serving on boards is demanding enough, not to mention the need to become more knowledgeable. "Time is the biggest issue with individual board members," said Richard R. Short, superintendent of the Community Unit School District 200 in Wheaton, Illinois. "There is so much to do as a board that time to gain skills is not given high priority."

Consultant Karl Plath said training can be helpful but boards "have to want it and that's not always the case. Board members are busy people and they don't always have the time or feel the urgency."

Williams said training programs in New Orleans are productive, but the ones who need it most often wouldn't participate.

Nancy Beals, board president of the Hamden, Connecticut, Public Schools, said better-trained board members "would be more aware of their responsibilities and better

able to distinguish between policy and administrative decisions." She said the state's school board association "offers excellent programs, but many board members do not take advantage of them." She said her board does not participate in formal programs to improve board skills.

Skills vs. style

But some believe that lack of skills is as much a problem with superintendents— not managerial or technical skills so much as "human skills," or the ability to relate to and interact with people, particularly board members.

Glass said many superintendents lack training in what should be considered the fundamental skills for the job, such as communications, conflict resolution and group process techniques.

Many superintendents lack training in what should be considered fundamental skills for the job, such as communications, conflict resolution and group process techniques.

"Many superintendents are not aware how important personal relations are and have had no training in it," Huge said.

"Superintendents are not surviving without these skills, and then they're not getting back in the profession," said consultant Charles Young. "Boards will say that many people satisfy the threshold of technical skills they want in a superintendent but interpersonal skills are what they are really looking for."

Samuel Husk, former executive director of the Council of Great City Schools, said big-city superintendents sometimes fail because of their "style," which usually means they have inadequate "personal and public communications" skills.

Part of it can be blamed on inadequate professional education for the superintendency. Superintendents interviewed for this Critical Issues Report often disparaged their preservice training for the job, but many of those also said that much of what is needed to be successful must be learned on the job. "We are not trained adequately as to job expectations," Hentges said. "Most universities don't teach these skills," Foster said.

AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency* found that superintendents believe their training programs could be substantially improved. Of those surveyed, about 44 percent said educational administration programs in general are good but 44 percent said they were fair and 8 percent called them poor (4 percent had no opinion). However, asked to rate their own administrative training, about 27 percent said it was excellent, 47 percent good and 26 percent fair or poor.

Superintendents' training

Superintendents surveyed for this book were sharply divided on the adequacy of their preservice training. Asked if their professional preparation provided them with the acquisition of the political, interpersonal and communications skills needed to work effectively with school boards, 54 percent answered yes and 46 percent no. But most of the yes answers were heavily qualified, many of them indicating that the training in those areas could have been improved and that many of the required skills can only be learned on the job.

School board presidents were asked if their superintendents' skills in these areas need improvement, and 35 percent answered yes while 65 percent said no. But even when they answered no, many said further upgrading of those skills was still possible.

The urban superintendent, in particular, needs skills in dealing with diverse groups, Don Ingwerson, superintendent of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky, said. "If you can't deal with multiple groups, you won't survive," he said, and many don't because they lack these skills. "The superintendent of today has not been educated for the job," he said in 1991 at an Urban Superintendents' Network conference, sponsored by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement.

Writing in the *Phi Delta Kappan* magazine, Professor Jerome T. Murphy of Harvard University attacked the whole enterprise of administrator training by universities. "At the very time that strong preparation programs for administrators are needed most, the programs themselves are in disarray," he said. He contends that most universities offer "watered-down courses to part-time students who are weary after a full day on the job" and aren't held to high standards of admissions and achievement of residency programs.

Policy training lacking

If the primary role of school boards is to develop policy, then a major responsibility of superintendents—as the chief adviser to boards—is to assist boards in policy development, but little attention has been paid to training for that function.

Luvern L. Cunningham of Ohio State University points out that "preparation programs for administrators have not singled out the superintendent's policy services to board members as a distinct and major responsibility for chief executives." Thus, if Cunningham is right, these programs likely fail to equip future superintendents with knowledge about the policy development process that boards should engage in as well as the superintendent's role in that process.

Part of it also is the need for new skills to cope with new challenges in schools. "More and more, the superintendent's role has to define the degree to which local schools and communities are able to control their destinies," Milt Goldberg said. "The superintendent has to balance the need to give people more authority against accountability, the need to create the administrative, organizational and programmatic conditions

Subtleties, Dynamics Uncovered

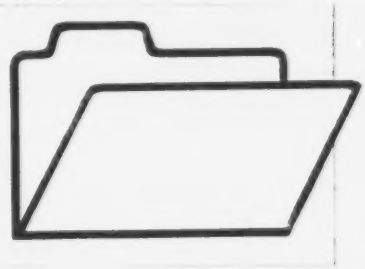
A Researcher Looks at Board-Superintendent Relationships

One university researcher has attempted to probe beneath the tension in board-superintendent relationships and to find out how both parties cope with it. The study by Professor Marilyn Tallerico of Syracuse University provides a rare analytical glimpse behind the scenes at the interactions between boards and superintendents.

Her goal, she said, was "to examine and describe how superintendents and school board members function within and around it (tension) and to uncover what shapes or guides their choices and behaviors."

What she uncovered was "a dynamic social process of politically negotiated agenda-building" or decision making, the product of "many important activities [that] are subtle and unobservable to the public."

Based on interviews in six school districts, she grouped board member behaviors in three clusters according to the way they collected and used information and their involvement in school affairs:



- **Passive acquiescence:** Relies on administrative staff for information, performs only official activities, such as board meetings; refers constituent concerns to the superintendent for resolution, and defers to the superintendent's judgment and recommendations.
- **Restive vigilance:** Visits teachers and administrative staff regularly, cultivates a wide range of information sources, follows up on or suggests resolutions to constituent concerns referred to the superintendent, persistently works to build support for preferred objectives, and seeks to oversee and govern the district actively.
- **Proactive supportive:** Similar to restive vigilance in active involvement in school affairs, but resembles passive acquiescence in deferral to the superintendent.

Tallerico also grouped superintendent behaviors in clusters, with degree of control the distinguishing factors:

- **More-controlling superintendents:** inclined to "channel selected information and educate or persuade toward a predetermined direction consistent" with the superintendent's view of "what is best."
- **Less-controlling superintendents:** inclined to promote the availability of a wide range of information and to seek agreement by encouraging divergent opinions.

Not premeditated behavior

Such behaviors by boards and superintendents, Tallerico said, are far from being the result of any "systematic forethought" and are "used

for such things to occur at the local level. That requires a different set of skills."

Union pressures

One other source of tensions between boards and superintendent is unionism. Union demands, primarily for a greater share of school revenues for teacher salaries, continue to put pressures on some boards, particularly those in big cities, and have led to strikes and other labor strife. In California, for example, Peters said the "increasing power of the unions to elect board members" is a major reason why some boards have gotten into administration.

A number of superintendents commented in the survey for this report that teachers unions and their demands for more ample pay and benefits sometimes play a major part in the financial pressures they must deal with. A New York

almost unconsciously." Board members and superintendents themselves often attributed these behaviors to "intuition, 'gut,' good judgment, common sense, politics, 'feel,' people skills, or similarly nebulous . . . phenomena," she wrote in an article in *Urban Education*.

Having categorized their behaviors, Tallerico then looked at possible explanations of why these individuals fall into the different clusters—or why they choose the behaviors they do to contend with the tension.

One explanation involves three distinct views of the democratic process as it relates to schools. She found:

- **Traditional-normative:** Local educational governance is viewed as "a bastion of grass-roots democracy and lay control." In this view, local voters elect a board to serve as the legislative body, the superintendent is employed to serve as the executive administrator and follows the instructions of the board, whose actions presumably reflect the wishes of the voters.
- **Professional-dominance**: Professional educators are likely to "be in possession of 'truth' about educational issues," and the superintendent should be the "appropriate dominant actor in decision and policy making." (More-controlling superintendents and both passive-acquiescent and proactive-support board members usually held this view, she said.)
- **Shared function:** Beliefs and attitudes she terms "safety-valve" mechanisms serve to "mediate and balance the degree of control exercised by constituents, the professional/executive branch [superintendent] and the lay/legislative branch of governance [board]." These mechanisms—possibly through negotiations—serve to "subtly and indirectly define parameters, set limitations, and constrain the latitudes within which superintendents and school boards function."

Perceptions of roles

A second explanation involves role conceptions, which tend to correspond to the views of the democratic process and result in "different understandings of who should direct and control decision making and of the relative wisdom/expertise of professionals versus lay representatives," she wrote.

The passive acquiescent and proactive supportive board members, then, typically adhered to a "technological interpretation of democracy and therefore tended to see their jobs as one of deference to the superintendent's expertise" and "a relatively subservient leadership role in governance." More-controlling superintendents held similar views, often referring to their board members as "amateurs rather than collaborators."

Less-controlling superintendents view the role relationship as "a sort of partnership of co-experts." Restive vigilant board members, however, "regard expertise not as the singular domain of professional educators" but as an area for involvement by themselves and their colleagues. They also stress for themselves an active oversight role as part of the democratic function of lay control.

A third explanation for behaviors, Tallerico said, relates to personal values. "It became clear that perceptions of character and trust colored their differing behavioral inclinations," she said. "Their emphasis on affective dimensions such as honesty, integrity, trustworthiness, and forthrightness seemed to be indicative of the underlying importance that these key players ascribe to the

BOCES superintendent said the "expectations of teachers and unions are not realistic in light of the fiscal crisis."

The political power of teachers also was mentioned as a source of increased pressures on school districts. "Teacher unions want to take over the board and community responsibility," said a North Dakota superintendent. And an Illinois superintendent said his teachers association "has become more militant over the years with the growing political power" of its state affiliate. "Teachers are better trained today [by the state affiliate] to understand labor negotiations and contract language," he said. "Legislation has resulted in broadening the decision-making powers now entrusted [to] or expected by teacher unions."

But respondents to the survey indicated much more concern over state mandates, community demands and financial constraints as sources of pressures, compared to

moral and ethical dimensions of leadership and governance."

Values are critical

Tallerico indicated that these personal values and perceptions affected the board members' views of their roles and presumably their relationships with superintendents. "For example, a partial explanation of the restiveness of vigilant board members was their lack of trust of the superintendent or their doubt about the superintendent's forthrightness," she said. "In contrast, proactive supportive board members held the superintendent's integrity in such high regard that they were inclined to describe their distrustful colleagues as excessively demanding or impossible to please."

In analyzing her data, Tallerico also used the concept of a "negotiated system" in trying to understand board-superintendent dynamics, which is inherent in the social process of "agenda-building" or reaching decisions.

The theory is that board members and superintendents, like other figures in social systems, possess differing resources, interests, motives, and sanctions that are used as "bargaining currency." Citing other research, she said the basic assumption is that board members and superintendents engage in bargaining and exchange to realize their beliefs and achieve their goals. And, again relying on related research, she argues that social bargaining and exchanges are motivated by returns they are expected to bring, which can be social as well as economic, and can sometimes involve vague, future obligations.

"Superintendents and school board members possess differing sets of bargaining chips."

"Consequently, social exchange requires trusting others to repay their obligations, a partial explanation, perhaps, for the focus on character and trust" that boards and superintendents often emphasize, she said.

When they engage in these kinds of negotiations, she said, "it is clear that superintendents and school board members possess differing sets of bargaining chips." They vary in quantity and quality of time, knowledge, ego-need, allies, and other kinds. The main resource of boards may be their legal authority and electoral power. Superintendents' resources include technical and professional expertise, greater longevity in districts than most board members, and ready access to information, staff, time and communications means.

"In sum, both superintendents and school board members command bargaining resources that may be employed as currency in social exchanges," Tallerico wrote. "The stakes in this negotiated system are influence on and control of the agenda as well as the stability and continued viability of the functional relationship itself."

And, she added, as is the case in much political bargaining, there is a great deal of "unpredictability, ambiguity, fluidity and nonrationality" in this board-superintendent negotiation system. Her conclusion is that boards and superintendents "are reasonably evenly matched as they bar-

teacher unions. In fact, for superintendents, the subject of unionism seems to have waned considerably as an issue over the past 10 to 20 years. AASA's 10-year study showed that superintendents in 1971 ranked teacher militancy and strikes fifth among the challenges they faced, compared to ninth in 1982 and 24th in 1992. In another AASA report, "Opinions and Status of AASA Members, 1990-91," superintendents ranked "teacher compensation issues" [the survey's measure of union activity] 20th on the list of problems areas they face, compared with 17th in 1988-89.

gain and mobilize resources to shape" the decisions they reach.

Process becomes clouded

But just how this system of negotiation and exchange shapes decisions in schools is not clear. It certainly seems to cloud the question of whether a board or the superintendent is primarily responsible for making any given decision, suggesting that an almost unfathomable complexity often cloaks the decision-making process.

For example, she said, board members help shape issues and decision-making agendas as they "participate in district curriculum committees with staff, channel teacher or parent concerns to the central office, follow up on those concerns by monitoring results, and build coalitions to support their vision of preferred solutions to specific issues." Tallerico described these activities as "powerful pre-decisional social processes that create the conditions and shape the choices of alternatives upon which policies and practices are constructed."

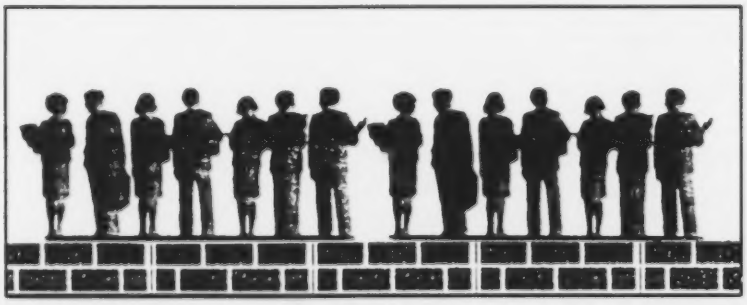
Dynamic and democratic

But the negotiation/exchange system is, in Tallerico's opinion, both "dynamic and democratic" with a lot stake. As she sees it, "superintendents and board members both have something to gain (e.g., the direction policy will take, personal sense of accomplishment, and stability in the functional relationship), and both have to pay a price (e.g., compromise or deference to the other in order to strike a bargain or gain a vote) as they negotiate their individual/collective agenda."

All of this was evident, she said, in the "unwritten agreements that were forged via what a number of board members referred to as 'horse-trading,' 'making deals,' or 'giving a little to get something,' and what several superintendents expressed as 'knowing when to hold 'em and when to fold 'em' and 'the need to let them win sometimes.'"

Tallerico's conclusion is that decision making in schools is highly fluid, offering "multiple opportunities to inject ideas and demands" into a system sometimes wrongly portrayed as closed and dominated by superintendents. Her analysis paints a picture of the board-superintendent relationship "as one in which skilled people, armed with many powerful tools, engage in a dynamic process of negotiation and enter into ever-changing coalitions."

The dynamic nature of board-superintendent relationships helps to explain why tensions exist and why they are likely to remain, as long as fundamentally different views of the process and roles exist and where personal values play such a major part.



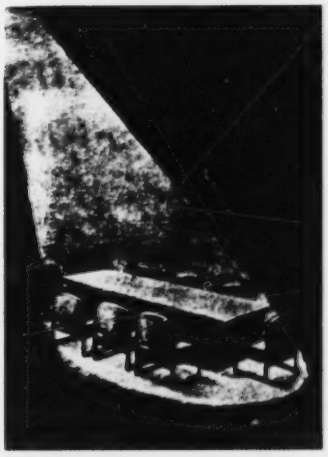
CHAPTER FIVE

Board-Superintendent Tensions:

Pressures from the Outside

As if school boards and superintendents didn't have enough of a built-in problem sorting out their roles and responsibilities, changes in American society have added significant new pressures on schools and board-superintendent relationships.

Public education in recent years has been swept up in a maelstrom of school reform, economic dislocation, social stirrings, and political activism that has placed new demands on school leadership.



Pressures on the public schools to solve the nation's ills were turned up to unprecedented levels. Federal and state governments laid out a new agenda for education, requiring schools to guarantee that all students are prepared for post-industrial age employment to make America more competitive in international markets.

Many school districts already had been moving ahead with major initiatives when the new agenda crystallized in the late 1980s. If reform has been a driving force of American schooling throughout its history, it reached a fever pitch as the 1990s began.

But then a recession struck the American economy amid this rush to reform, leaving schools without enough money to do business as usual, much less finance a dramatic restructuring. In fact, some school districts today are confronted with the most serious and potentially disruptive reductions in funding since the Great Depression.

Financial woes

AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency* has documented an overriding financial worry of boards and superintendents. Superintendents surveyed for the study said financial issues were the number one problem facing school boards and the biggest challenge confronting the superintendency. Board members and superintendents surveyed for this Critical Issues Report also said school financing was a major source of pressure on them, particularly in terms of states mandating policies without adequate funding.

Overwhelmingly, superintendents and board presidents said pressures associated with their jobs and elected positions have increased: 87 percent of the superintendents reported increased pressures, along with 89 percent of the board presidents. Both groups also agreed on the major source of the pressures—the states. Rising demands and more mandates, coupled with the same or, in most cases, less financial aid had increased pressures on them to unprecedented heights, they said.

The next biggest source of pressures for both superintendents and board presidents, the survey showed, was their communities' simultaneous demands for better education and reluctance to pay the level of taxes to support needed improvements.

Summing up the situation facing many schools, one

superintendent said, "I have been fortunate to have had very positive boards of education for about 27 of the last 30 years. A state fiscal crisis (recently) resulted in high shortfalls in state aid. Local property taxes skyrocketed and the local politicians moved into the board the last two years." The new board majority was elected "with a clear political agenda to reduce educational costs and to 'cut' administrative staffing and salaries."

List of pressures grows

Another factor is that while "everyone expects their needs to be fully met with little concern over cost or other challenges facing schools, there is no common agreement on what schools should do and should not do," said Lawrence Heyerdahl, superintendent of the Ashwaubenon School District in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Another superintendent defined the pressures this way:

"Most of the additional pressure comes from the declining state aid to schools, yet an increase in their mandates necessitates more time and money to be spent. It affects curriculum, staffing, negotiations, etc.," said Jerome J. Ochs, Geneseo Central Schools, New York. "The community is supportive but the time is near when they will show their frustrations with economic conditions by voting down the budget."

A New York superintendent had this list: Shortage of resources, union members and retired employees on school boards, single-agenda board members, and failure of board members to understand and accept their roles—all of which lead to layoffs, morale problems, labor conflict, and interference with day-to-day operations of schools.

Or to put it bluntly, "Everyone wants schools to be better; however, no one really knows what they want. This results in frustration for everyone," said Ronald G. Crawford, Snohomish School District, Washington.

Board presidents offered similar lists:

"Increased economic pressure due to declining enrollment and pressure from the state for small districts to consolidate. The state is also experiencing financial difficulties and is cutting our funding even further. The state continues to pass mandates that cost money to put into effect," wrote Kenneth J. Anderson, Preston Community Schools, Iowa.

"Steady decline in funds available from federal and state sources, coupled with a steady increase in federal- and state-mandated programs and inflation. Increased union activity in the district. Increased demand for programs and services by the community without a comparable commitment from the community to fund same," said Abigail L. Roseman, Black Oak Mine Unified School District, Georgetown, California.

Something's got to give

All in all, "declining dollars available for educational delivery combined with a public outcry for more programs and improvements create a lethal mixture," summarized William G. Keane, superintendent of the Oakland Public Schools in Waterford, Michigan.

The upshot is added strain to board-superintendent relationships. "Inadequate funding is the biggest source of tension (between boards and superintendents)," said consultant Charles Young. Michael Usdan, president of the Institute for Educational Leadership, concurred. "When money is short, people get unhappy with each other," he said. In such an atmosphere, Young said, "someone has to take the fall, and usually it's the superintendent."

Rising criticism of schools

Even if the dream of sufficient funding came true, outside pressures on schools would be formidable in their own right. Public schools have been a favorite target for public criticism since their very beginning, but it seems to run stronger and deeper now than ever before. Ed Goodwin, superintendent of the Perry Public Schools in Ohio, said there is "a general feeling that public schools are less than adequate because graduates are weak, Japan does better, business can't find good employees [and] the media picks up on public opinion and sounds the populist alarm."

"The key thing is the country has changed," said consultant Karl Plath. "There are terrific demands on schools to do many things. Those demands were along academic lines in the past. But now the expectations are for fundamental change, particularly in the large districts."

"It's true throughout public education," said Professor Larry Cuban of Stanford University. "Since World War II, education has been either close to or at the top of the national agenda of institutions that can improve the country. What we've had in the last decade or so—back-to-basics, minimum competency, *A Nation at Risk*, and so forth—all have created a hyper-interest in education and hyper-criticisms of education, too. The critics have said that schools have failed, citing drugs, violence, low test scores. Board members get elected to make changes. They make promises on the grounds that schools are in bad shape. This has put new pressures on education and it has been translated into conflict."

A new agenda

The first wave of school reform hit in the early 1980s with the demand that schools concentrate on conventional academic achievement, but at an accelerated pace. However, the second wave of reform, which emerged later in the decade, called for a major departure from past performance: a whole restructuring of education.

This new agenda calls for a "broadened participation in education decisions, a shift from accountability for educational inputs to outputs, higher order curricula, linkages to agencies providing human and social services, systematic solutions to the problem of transition into the world of work, greater equity in access to quality education, and so forth," said Jacqueline P. Danzberger of the Institute for Educational Leadership.

A new agenda calls for broadened participation in education decisions.

As Danzberger put it, this new agenda created "difficult internal and external political challenges" for boards, which are felt equally by superintendents as well. If most would agree that organizations as complex as school systems cannot be changed quickly, it is no wonder that, with few exceptions, boards and superintendents were ill prepared for the scope and speed of change that this new agenda envisioned.

Obstacles to progress

In part, boards and superintendents have been unable to respond with dispatch to this mammoth reform undertaking because of the way their functions in society have developed over the years, some say.

Surrounded by "confusion about the roles and scope of responsibility," Professor Luvern L. Cunningham of Ohio State University said, the American school board historically has devoted most of its energy to "noneducation matters, most of them dealing with adults. Seldom were the educational interests of children in evidence. The questions before the board were those of finance and personnel as well as contracts with school facility maintenance and improvements. The relationship between board member discourse and educational policy relevant to learners was remote to nonexistent."

Cunningham's conclusion was backed up by a 1986 IEL report, which said boards must strengthen their effectiveness by shifting their focus. "More time should be spent on educational issues and less time on administrative responsibilities and what the public perceives as 'trivial' matters," the report said.

Micromanagement

A Twentieth Century Fund report issued in 1992 goes even further than the IEL report, contending that many boards have become obstacles to effective governance because of their tendency "to micromanage, to become immersed in the day-to-day administration of their districts that is properly the realm of the professional administrator." The report, however, places the blame for this on the states for "creating the voluminous laws and regulations for which boards are ultimately responsible and which force them to micromanage."

"Bogged down in the minutiae of routine administration and spending endless time dealing with detail," the report said, many boards have abdicated their responsibility for policy making to superintendents. And some superintendents have abetted this development by overwhelming boards with detail, it charged.

The report's central recommendation is for states to enact legislation transforming school boards into "policy boards" from what it calls "collective management committees." As policy boards, they would be "responsible for setting broad policy guidelines, establishing oversight procedures, defining standards of accountability, and ensuring adequate planning for future needs," the report said.

Instructional leadership

Confusion about the superintendent's executive responsibilities, researchers say, also has played a part in the responsiveness of school districts to the call for school improvement.

Because of outside pressures, superintendents in the last several decades have come to be characterized as politician, negotiator, or statesman and infrequently as instructional leader, Professor Robert K. Wimpelberg of the University of New Orleans said. His research shows that "the modern superintendent seems to pay little direct attention to instruction."

Wirt said superintendents haven't paid more attention to instructional accomplishments because they have been busy "coping with economic restraints, (school district) consolidation, state-federal mandates or the individual interests of the board members." In addition, he said, until recently there has been little indication of public pressure on superintendents for academic improvement, and even now in many communities "there just may be no demand for instructional leadership from this office."

Wirt also said "political factors" that shape the job militate against superintendents' instructional leadership. "Success in office consists not of being an instructional leader but of developing interpersonal skills for working out exchanges among all levels" in order to survive and succeed. Superintendents and boards today are certainly attuned to the growing public demands for school performance, and these pressures have contributed to heightened tensions between them as they have increased their own mutual expectations for addressing those demands.

Growing social pressures

Superintendent Don Wilke of the Janesville-Waldorf-Pemberton School District in Minnesota, said the chief source of pressure on schools is "the ever-changing society," including "the breakdown of the family/extended family and the resultant movement to put more tasks 'on the backs of the schools.'"

Pressures like these, consultant Ira Krinksy said, arise from the fact that "public education has become very close to people. It is in everyone's home. And close to boards, too. Boards are very prone to interest groups. And ethnic groups have conflicting needs and interests. The larger, the more diverse the student population, the more conflict in the district. All this contributes to the tension, the strains, and the pulls."

Florence Baugh, former board member in the Buffalo Public School System and former president of the Council of Great City Schools, said that as other institutions, such as the family and church, have seen their influence eroded, "society has expected schools to do more than educate children and to be a panacea for all of society's ills. And it has attracted folks to school boards who very often have other agendas than the education of children."

But the social problems aren't confined to the cities anymore. Superintendent Dennis O. Nathan of the Wyndmere, North Dakota, Public Schools, said that in one week "I dealt with . . . two family incest [cases], one sexual abuse, a suicide, two parents arrested on drug charges, and a runaway." He noted that "this type of behavior was unknown . . . here only a few years ago." His rural district has 315 students.

Schools also may find the economic crisis laid at their doorsteps. James F. Regan, a former member of the New York City Board of Education, said, "The economy of the country as a whole brings tensions between the board and superintendent over the inability of graduates to get jobs."

Thomas A. Shannon, executive director of the National School Boards Association, sees "tumult in the country over education and, as a result, in the central office between boards and superintendents" in some districts. "Where you have lack of direction in the community, it is reflected in relations between board members and superintendents," he said.

"Society is having trouble defining who we are (as educators), and there is confusion over where we are going," said Art Gosling, superintendent of the Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools.

Changing demographics

The demographics of American education also have added to the pressures on schools. "Schools are faced with a changing population," said Samuel Husk, former executive director of the Council of Great City Schools. "They are no longer serving just a middle-class population. It is more disadvantaged with more social needs."

These demographic changes have presented dual challenges to schools, Danzberger said. "The student population has become both increasingly diverse and drawn from populations historically more difficult to educate due to their economic and social circumstances," she said. In addition, school boards are faced with the "erosion of the 'natural' political base for public education" as the proportion of households with children of school age has dropped to around 25 percent and as a low as 15 percent in some cities, she said. Thus, the majority of those who pay taxes to support schools do not have children who use them.

An IEL report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership," said public support of schools also is weakened because the parents of economically disadvantaged students "generally lack influence in the community." These demographic shifts as well as the loss of

middle-class parents, both white and minority, "create serious political problems for school boards," the report said.

Diversity and politics

Diversity sometimes creates community divisions, often reflected in school board politics. "If you have a heterogeneous community, you get different interest groups," Wheeler said. "The stress in cities or in any urban area is from different groups being aligned racially who want part of the control (of boards)," she said. "Often, people cannot come together on a viewpoint, leaving the community and the board divided."

Wirt said the "phenomenon of social diversity" is what explains greater educational conflict in the urban areas. It means that "more and different qualities of demands are generated from a more diverse social structure with its greater variety in preferences for public policies." Changes in diversity, he noted, can produce new and different kinds of demands on boards.

From an analytical viewpoint, "cultural pluralism producing diversity in demands . . . results in stress and political conflicts," Professor Laurence Iannaccone of the University of California at Santa Barbara wrote. These demands challenge existing political arrangements and reopen previously settled issues for discussion, creating increased political conflict, he said. "Such a process of revolutionary political challenge is under way today, perhaps especially in educational governance," Iannaccone added. "As is to be expected, it reveals the perennial underlying tensions of educational governance," including the "tension between lay and professional power." That was written in the mid-1970s, but rings even truer today.

Consolidation of districts

Linked to diversity is school district consolidation, a slow-moving and almost unnoticed factor from the national perspective, but one that has been extremely important and keenly felt in the communities where it has occurred. Wirt noted that much of the potential for increased political and social pressures on school districts after 1948 grew out of actions to combine districts, at first mostly for operational efficiency reasons and later for desegregation purposes. Consolidation disrupted the many small, homogeneous school districts that once existed in the nation, he said.

Iannaccone said the "centralizing phenomenon in school government through consolidation of districts" has been one of the main features of educational governance throughout the century. The consequences almost always have been an increase in the diversity of those governed by the district and a decrease in the proportion of the governors to the governed in the district. All of which has added up to more social and political tensions.

Increasing diversity, along with the myriad other controversial issues—teacher militancy, community control, student rights, and accountability—have "politicized local school districts in unprecedented ways and irrevocably pulled them deeper into the mainstream of the body politic," Iannaccone said.

"These developments have placed great stress on local boards of education, which no longer are as insulated and isolated from the general body politic as they once were. The unique separation of school government from general government has been eroded as educational decision making has been sucked into the cauldron of larger societal issues, such as race, finance, poverty, and public employee collective negotiations."

Political activism on the rise

At the same time, and partly as an outgrowth of these social undercurrents, a new outpouring of political activism has engulfed the nation, spilling over into the board rooms of local school districts across the nation. If participatory democracy was given rebirth as an idea of the 1960s, it seems to have been activated in virtually every community 30 years later.

In commenting on the kind of board members seeking and holding office today, one of the first things that superintendents—and board members themselves—mentioned in interviews for this report is their activist bent. These activist-members are products of communities now more interested in what is going on in schools and more committed to exerting an influence over school activities. And activist-members carry their inclinations into board service.

"The new people coming in want to be involved," Barbara Wheeler, a board member in Downers Grove, Illinois, said. "The new ones are more activist minded and demanding. It comes out of the 1960s and 1970s."

Desire to act

Activist board members have a desire to do something." Joseph T. Hentges, superintendent in Woodstock, Illinois,

agrees. "I suspect it comes out of the political activism at the community level, the criticisms schools are getting at the state and national levels and the inability to turn districts in new directions," he said.

Joan Kowal, superintendent of the Volusia County School District in DeLand, Florida, sees a "new breed of person as board member" who wants to be active and involved. "Most boards now see themselves in a revitalized role," she said. "It's different than it was 10 to 12 years ago. People today seem more qualified. They have more education, more commitment and concern and a willingness to get in there and work. They operate more in an egalitarian sense, in a Jeffersonian tradition, because it is required of them by the community."

Boards today, she said, are faced with "a persistent high level of pressure" to address issues such as diversity and excellence. "Everywhere constituents are reminding you of their expectations," Kowal said. "They are aware there is more at stake in education today. Education means more—to get jobs—and they see [board service] as a moral responsibility. There can no longer be 'throwaway kids.' And there is incredible media coverage, and the boards are exposed to it."

Kowal said boards are "serving at a time when education is more of a political issue than ever before. Before, education and politics weren't supposed to mix. Now we have a national agenda for education. We have business involvement, and corporate CEOs walking the halls of state legislatures. All of this has had an incredible impact on why boards are different."

In one new study, the perception of a group of veteran superintendents was that "businessmen-dominated boards that tell the superintendent 'you run the schools' have now been replaced by male and female professionals (e.g., lawyers, teachers)—and by housewives."

Conducted by Professors Robert Crowson and Van Cleve Morris of the University of Illinois at Chicago, the study is part of research on superintendents and the leadership they provide. The group of superintendents being studied indicated that far from being a source of tension, "these 'new' boards seemed to represent a source and a new form of partnership in school district administration," Crowson and Morris said.

But many other superintendents—and board members as well—do consider this new breed of board member a source of tension, not necessarily in a negative sense. The new members can be more demanding, questioning and assertive employers of superintendents, who may be unaccustomed to dealing with such boards.

A Superintendent's Lament:

I Enjoy My Job, But . . .

Despite my comments on this survey, I enjoy my job and have gotten along with my school boards over the past 24 years. The problem is . . . things are changing:

- **Unions and or retirees are taking over school boards.**
- **The tension between parents who want and need good education for their children and fiscal conservatives who want only to reduce spending and cut taxes is overwhelming.**
- **Special interest groups are backing board candidates to make sure their interests are served.**
- **Board members won't stay out of the schools and out of day-to-day administration.**
- **More and more individuals are trying to use school board positions as a launching platform for political careers.**
- **Too many school board members have absolutely no interest in improving schools. They run for the school board for other reasons.**

No matter how skilled or unskilled the superintendent may be, board members who want to run the district are going to cause trouble. In-service training, outside consultants, conferences, workshops, retreats, etc., all have potential to improve school boards but . . . only [for] those who desire to improve. The challenge for the next generation of superintendents is 'how do I get them to want self-improvement?'

—Anonymous respondent

The baby boomers

The IEL report says the new profile of professional board members springs from a new self-image. "The philosophical orientation of board members varies considerably from the stereotype of 50 years ago when most saw themselves as institutional trustees," the report said. "Now greater numbers view themselves as representatives of some (or all) of the community rather than as trustees who rely simply on their own judgment for decisions. This individual orientation influences the interactions of the board and members' perceptions of the role of the superintendent and staff."

These new board members often are "younger people who have really good confrontational skills," Young said. "Some of the older superintendents have a real problem with it." Some of the veteran superintendents talk about "a decline in the quality, background, and motivation of board members," he said. "They think boards were better, more compliant, in the past."

The new activist-minded board members come from the generation of Americans born between 1946 and 1964 and, therefore, are sometimes called "baby boomer board members." In fact, the "baby boomers" represent approximately 55 percent of the current population of school board members in the United States, wrote Kara and Richard Funk in an article in the *Executive Educator*. Kara Funk is assistant director of the superintendent search service, and Richard Funk is associate executive director of the Michigan Association of School Boards.

Won't accept less

These baby boomers are the most highly educated board members in history, the Funks point out, and perhaps because they are such inveterate education consumers they "will not accept less than an active role in setting education policy."

Baby boomer board members tend to be the epitome of activism. According to the Funks, "their sophisticated and time-consuming demands are draining the energy and the patience of many school executives." These boards "want to participate in organizations that give them access to socially worthwhile activities," their article says, and education is a prime example of such an activity. "They come with a sincere desire to make a difference."

But there is a downside to their being board members as well. "Baby boomers as a group often have difficulty working together," the Funks wrote. "They can be impatient, demanding and value-conscious. They are quite used to having their own way. They demand highly personalized, high-quality services."

These members "expect to be actively involved in shaping programs, policy, and procedures," the article said. "Baby boomers—reared in an environment of instant gratification—often insist on satisfying all desires at once. They believe firmly in participatory management: if they don't 'own' a policy decision, they tend not to support programs to implement it."

Young said that when he was a superintendent, the professional people on the board "taught me a lot about conflict resolution by modeling it." Many professionals still serve on boards, he said, but in blue-collar districts, board members "tend not to have the social interaction experiences, and sometimes they ignite each other," producing a good deal of board divisiveness.

Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo said board members "now want to be educator-members—they want to know as much about the schools as the superintendents." There is a "real difference in their need to get involved in the action," he said. "In the old days, they came from the 'power structure' and often were professionals or business executives. They had broad experience in managing complex organizations. Now you get a broader spectrum of people."

What is doable?

Plath said school board elections today seem to be more "politicized, more people are running, and they tend to make more promises" but many potential board members "don't have the background to know what is doable."

The motivation for citizen involvement in schools and influence on boards reflects the intensified interest in education today. "Everyone seems to have a personal opinion about precisely what type of education the school should provide," Professor Richard S. Podemski of the University of Alabama said. "Everyone is also willing to criticize the school when it fails to live up to those expectations." Although they may rarely be articulated, opinions on education vary widely, and it is difficult, if not impossible, for boards and superintendents "to develop a simple, efficient organizational and instructional structure" that will satisfy everyone, Podemski noted.

Motivations of boards

Clearly, most board members get elected with good intentions, even if they sometimes are not expressed in the most positive terms. But a piece of classic research from

the 1950s shows that board members' motivations are not always the betterment of schools.

Donald J. McCarty's study of board members, described by Roald F. Campbell and his associates in their book, *The Organization and Control of American Schools*, found that 54 percent of board members interviewed "expressed self-oriented motivations for seeking office" and "were interested in achieving personal goals or in representing special interest groups." The other 46 percent had "community-oriented motives" for advancing objectives of the school systems. "Some saw board membership as desirable because it would lead to political advancement, offer personal prestige, or provide a means to plead the causes of special interests or to voice disapproval of the way schools were operated," Campbell's report of the study said.

The orientation of members toward board service also was linked to cohesiveness in the membership. "Boards composed of a majority of self-oriented board members were found to evidence high friction in the everyday conduct of school board business," the report said. "On the other hand, boards with a majority of their membership made up of community-oriented members displayed low friction in their operations."

Parents and taxpayers are more demanding, and boards are being forced to respond to their constituents... People have become more vocal and self-serving....

Contradict image

In analyzing McCarty's research and another similar study, Campbell said their conclusions "together contradict the general image of American school board members as altruistic public servants."

These personal ambitions and political aspirations of board members escalated in the 1960s, Iannaccone observed, and since then the previous "consensual and somewhat closed style of educational politics, with professional educators playing major roles, has undergone dramatic transformations." If anything, that trend seems to have intensified in recent years, many believe.

"A lot of community pressure is being applied to boards," Superintendent Lewis W. Finch of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado said. "They are being asked to represent their constituencies, and there is greater influence of special interest groups, which want results and will hold them accountable. That pressure then is transferred to the superintendent."

Boards more politicized

Tensions between boards and superintendents "may be related to board members becoming more politicized," said Art Gosling, superintendent in Arlington, Virginia. "They have to be more responsive to pressure groups, who are harder and harder to fend off. And there are more pressure groups. I'm sympathetic with members who are trying to cope with that. Sometimes they have to take up issues with the superintendent for their own survival." In his view, "the problem isn't in poorer quality people running for boards."

Parents and taxpayers are more demanding, and boards are being forced to respond to their constituents. "People have become more vocal and self-serving," said Mary M. Roe, board president of the Pinckneyville, Illinois, Community High School District No. 101. "As board members, we see the large picture. Each group often only sees its own point of view. Unfortunately, board members become indebted to certain groups for their election."

But pressures on school boards don't just come from the local community, said Ed Whigham, former superintendent in Dade County, Florida, and a retired college professor. It comes from legislatures and employee unions, too, he said. His comments were contained in an article in the *American School Board Journal* by Andrew Trotter and Gregg W. Downey.

Unions increasingly have taken the position that school employee representatives should bypass administrative staff and negotiate directly with boards, who make the final decisions, he said. This has pushed boards deeper into an area traditionally reserved for management. "The point I'm trying to make is that board involvement in management decisions is not always something board members can avoid," he said. "The board members aren't always wrong." But, he added, many times they are, and in those cases, "they probably just don't understand their roles."

Pressure groups emerge

The activist impulse also is seen in the emergence of greater numbers of citizen groups aimed at influencing schools—sometimes characterized as pressure groups.

The 1992 Study of the American School Superintendency found a high degree of awareness of these groups. About 65 percent of the superintendents surveyed said more "community pressure groups" have appeared in the last 10 years to try to influence the board. And in the big cities, that percentage is over 87.

Pressure groups, the report noted, frequently pop up in communities where school districts rely heavily on local property tax revenues for financial support. "In many such communities, local taxpayer groups have pressured school boards over budget matters," the report said. "In other districts, ad hoc pressure groups are formed to question an aspect of curriculum or to urge the board to fire or retain a staff member." Sometimes that staff member is the superintendent.

Single-issue members

The increased political turbulence also has given rise to what has become known as the "single-issue" board member, often the flip side of the community activist who is homing in on a specific goal.

Anyone who has ever run for a school board office has probably had a favorite issue that energized him or her, some point out. But today new members who get tagged with the "single issue" label often seem to be almost obsessed with that one concern—to the exclusion of the issues and problems involving the school district as a whole, others say.

Typically, they get elected on a single issue—taxes, sex education, busing, textbooks, or possibly even the superintendent. Boards and superintendents say that coping with single-issue members can be a big headache and sometimes disruptive to the governing process.

Robert O'Connell, superintendent of the Wrentham, Massachusetts, Public Schools, said that "if there is just one member who is vindictive or angry, then it can cause ill effects on the board. He or she is always planting the seeds of distrust on both sides."

It's not unusual for every board to have one single-issue member today, Young said. They often seem driven by their cause, he said, but "they can become some of the best board members," if their interests are broadened to include the entire school system.

The IEL survey found major concern among board members, educators, and the public about members with "single constituencies or issues." The "divisiveness" that such members create is a major factor "affecting board effectiveness and community perceptions," the report said.

Sometimes, single-issue members turn out to be members or supporters of pressure groups with "special interests." Indeed, the IEL report said, "many board members complained that more of their colleagues now represented special interest groups and that the trusteeship concept of representing the entire community had been weakened."

Personal agendas

"Urban Dynamics," a report of the National School Boards Association, found in its survey that "the most serious impediments to stable relationships between the school board and the superintendent occur when a single board member advocates an agenda on behalf of his/her constituency that is in conflict with school board goals."

Boards and superintendents also agreed that "promotion of personal agendas" was the main motive of members trying to micromanage. The report indicated that single-issue members often create "negative personal dynamics between a single board member and the rest of the board."

Some board members' single issue may be the neighborhood where they live. Superintendent Richard R. Short said that in his Wheaton, Illinois, district, "Even though elections are at large, many issues either are or are perceived to be geographic, and some board members find it difficult to separate their votes from their residential locations."

Dramatic increase

Consultant Jim Huge said in his experience single-issue board members "have increased pretty dramatically in the last 10 years. . . . More and more people are being elected with a point of view on one issue." Some of these members "come on the board as a result of community pressures to get rid of someone. That drives a lot of single-issue members."

As Huge sees it, this trend in board service reflects the lively nature of community politics and the many controversial education issues that parents are interested in. "There is more activism at every level and divisiveness with the community," he said. "The pendulum swings, and one group will have their way and then another. . . . Part of it is in the frustration people feel in their perceived lack of progress in school reform."

"I see an incredible increase in the impact of special interest groups," Thomas Payzant, San Diego superintendent, said. "How you square that reality, which has shaped decision making in the public sector, with the desire to get broad-based involvement of general-interest groups—it's very hard to do," he said. For example, he continued, having to cut a budget can become an ordeal when "you are

challenged by interest groups trying to make sure their ox is not gored."

On major issues facing the San Diego district, Payzant said, "we put together task forces that are representative of the community and hope to reach a consensus on a course of action. But you can still get special interests involved, and it can make it really tough to get that consensus."

Seek quick fix

One of the outgrowths of single-issue members is their impulse to get the "quick fix," board members and superintendents said. "I'm always amazed at how many boards hire superintendents to fix something," Underwood said. "It's so unrealistic."

Here is the way IEL's Danzberger views it: "Most school boards want immediate improvement in educational attainment for the students in their districts as much as do their constituents. School boards know, even as they publicly may demand fast turnarounds from professional staff, that substantive change and reforms require more time than either politicians or their constituents wish to tolerate.

"As a people, we tend to rush to identify the problem and search for a quick fix. School boards are political bodies, and the members of political bodies like to tell their constituents that the problem can be fixed. How do you tell the voters, 'Elect me to a three-year term on the board, and in 10 years you may see change in the institution?' Pressures for change on the school board are frequently translated into unrealistic demands on superintendents and into rhetoric for public consumption."

Heller said board members "are always looking for a quick fix," even though the problems in a school district may be "solvable only with a long-term solution." Jason said schools reflect society, which "is in for quick fixes for problems that have evolved over many years." The public, she said, "has very little patience and sometimes boards have little, too."

James Buchanan, superintendent of the Tempe Union High School District in Arizona, pointed out that boards often "need to know what the immediate results will be," but aren't always prepared to make the tough decisions to get those results.

Former superintendent and consultant Kenneth Peters said these "special agenda or slanted agenda" board members often are elected in California by teachers unions or supporters of federally funded programs, such as bilingual education, to protect their interests. "They don't want to listen to the superintendent in terms of the needs of the whole program," he said.

In many states over the last 10 to 15 years, teachers unions have become more active in politics, including school board elections, and have been successful in electing candidates whom they have supported, superintendents said.

Pursuing political careers

Some board members, Peters said, view board service "as a political step to the (city) council" or some other office. Election to the school board is seen as a way to gain "status" in the community for other political pursuits, he said.

A superintendent in the South said he has "a highly political board which cares little about children or education, but rather is more interested in forwarding their own political careers and giving contracts to their friends."

Baugh said in some cities boards have immersed themselves in politics, and single-issue members are a manifestation of that. "When you have politics entering into board elections, groups promote candidates and try to get them elected to have a voice at the table," she said. "Schools are the largest employers in many urban areas and they award a lot of contracts. When the economy is strained, politicos look around for places to aggrandize themselves."

The result is interference by boards or some of their members in administration, she said. In employee contract negotiations, for example, board members might interfere in the process. While the superintendent is supposed to be the chief negotiator, board members get involved to ingratiate themselves with employee groups who helped elect them. The result is chaos, which undermines the negotiating strength of the district.

This kind of board behavior "has become almost rampant in the cities," Baugh said. She said her opinion is based on observations and conversations with large city board members over the past 15 years. "I was amazed to hear what boards saw as their role and the superintendents' role," she said. "I saw a clear trend of lay people usurping the authority of superintendents. Some of them were serving their own interests, and the children were forgotten about."

Lee Etta Powell, superintendent-in-residence and professor of educational leadership at George Washington University, said in some cities, school board candidates are "heavily influenced by partisan politics" and run as members and with the support of the Republican or Democratic parties. The control of school boards in some cases has shifted from communities to special interest groups, she said. "Election to the school board has become a reward for something the candidate did for someone and often is a stepping stone to other political office," she said.

Election by area

Such politicization of board governance sometimes is heightened by the election of members from geographic areas or wards within districts, which continues to increase significantly, according to "Urban Dynamics," a 1992 NSBA report. Ward elections may encourage parochialism on the part of board members, who may tend to favor issues emanating from or directly affecting their areas or wards, sometimes at the expense of districtwide issues.

These board members often are contrasted with members elected at large, whose interests are said to be more likely to embrace the well-being of the whole district. In recent years, ward elections have been imposed on school districts by state legislatures, the courts, or through community ballot initiatives.

Currently, about 26 percent of board members in urban areas are elected from wards and another 25 percent through a combination of ward and at-large elections, according to "Urban Dynamics." As of 1987, the report said, less than 7 percent of all board members were elected from wards.

When conflicts between boards and superintendents "are politically inspired, they reflect the nature of local representative governments," the report said. "Urban school boards naturally are politicized through the practice of apportioning school board seats by ward or district, a practice designed to assure minority representation. Board members and superintendents are at odds about the degree to which board representation by wards rather than at large creates dissension between themselves."

Pressures for change on the school board are frequently translated into unrealistic demands on superintendents and into rhetoric for public consumption.

Superintendents see problem

A survey conducted for the NSBA report showed that 62 percent of the superintendents agreed with the statement that "electing or appointing members by district or ward tends to promote parochialism," while only 35 percent of the board members agreed. The survey for this Critical Issues Report found that most of the sampled districts still elected their board members at large. But where ward elections did exist, there was some cause for concern.

Asked if ward elections had resulted in some members focusing on narrow interests or single-interest constituencies, 35 percent of the board presidents and 20 percent of the superintendents answered yes. But asked if it is a source of friction when members reflect those narrow interests, 55 percent of the board presidents and 50 percent of the superintendents said it was.

A rapid shift

The early 1980s saw a definite "shift in the governance structure in the cities to election by ward," Husk said, to the point where the large majority of big-city districts now use the system.

The trend toward ward election of urban board members grew out of the 1960s as a counter-reform to the turn-of-the-century move to take education out of politics by adopting the use of at-large elections. Ward elections were part of a civil rights movement to empower racial and ethnic minority populations through the ballot box in the North and the South, Danzberger pointed out.

"These populations sought a greater voice and control over the public institutions upon which these populations were and are dependent," she said. Starting with the creation of community school boards in New York City in the 1960s, ward elections resulted in "increasing numbers of urban districts with school board members elected from discrete electoral districts within the school district, rather than districtwide election of members," Danzberger said.

The NSBA report said the trend has accelerated since a 1986 U.S. Supreme Court decision which challenged at-large elections on the grounds that they unconstitutionally dilute the voting strength of minority groups.

Impact on leadership

The shift to ward elections, Danzberger said, also has been marked by the "loss of the trusteeship defini-

tion of school board service, increased politicization among board members, and, in many urban districts, an absence of effective consensual board leadership." Divisiveness has resulted when "constituents view individual board members as 'their member' who is on the board to represent their issues, desires, and/or part of town," she said.

Ward-elected boards may be more representative of the communities they serve, Danzberger said, but they frequently produce "fragmented leadership and decisions made in terms of political pressures or conflicting interest groups." The history of these boards indicates that as they take office, a turnover of superintendents follows "even where the superintendent has provided strong and successful professional leadership," she said.

Cuban said ward elections do contribute to more conflict between boards and superintendents because the system "makes explicit the involvement of people where it has been underneath before."

"When conflicts between boards and superintendents are politically inspired, they reflect the nature of local representative governments."

Consultant Carroll Johnson agreed that ward elections have brought "narrow purposes" to school boards. "But I'm not saying it is not appropriate or proper," he added. "Some minorities may never have gained representation. Minorities who get elected come on the board with a greater sense of the need for equity and justice. Boards are far more representative of people they serve than they were 40 years ago. But there is less focus on districtwide objectives."

Gosling said ward-elected boards seem to lose "that breadth of vision" needed for good leadership of schools. He fears that too many of these board members "view their survival in terms of bringing home the goodies for the constituents. You can't run a school system like that. The notion of ward elections ultimately is not in the best interests of the kids."

Lose "big picture"

Superintendent Everett J. Williams said that until four years ago, his New Orleans district had a five-member board elected at large. Then, the state legislature approved a plan for seven members—two at large and five elected by ward, he said. "The ones elected by ward don't understand they are responsible for the whole system," he said. "They think they are only responsible to the constituents of their districts." This attitude has contributed to what he calls a "bad image" of the board.

Payzant said election by ward "makes it hard for the superintendent to bring the board together on big-picture issues" because of the many tensions around that mix of people. "The superintendent is arguing for all kids, but that may run counter to what individual members see as their mandate from a ward," he said. "I see a lot of it playing out in racial politics. When the issues are so strongly debated and the differences so great, even members of a well-meaning board can start targeting personalities."

Payzant said he senses that in the past "a lot of attention was paid to constituent interests, but boards had come together on policy issues in the interest of the overall district. But now gridlock seems to have emerged in the last decade or two, and it's a case of win or lose—and [some members say] we want to win."

Board turnover

The turnover of board members also is seen as a source of tension with superintendents as well as within the internal makeup of boards themselves. Why? Because this turnover means more time and effort must be spent by boards and superintendents in helping new members learn how the system works. And often that time is spent trying to convince these new members they have responsibilities for governing the entire district, not just a segment of it relating to a geographic area or burning issue that interests them.

That is not always smooth sailing, they said, for the simple reason that getting charged-up new members with "mandates" from voters to channel their concerns into broad issues can be a prickly task. "New board members feel no particular ownership in what has been said or done by previous members; this is a big problem for many superintendents," said Tracy Dust, superintendent of the New Albany-Floyd County Consolidated School Corp.,

Indiana. Another superintendent, Ed Goodwin of the Perry Public Schools in Ohio, said as board members change, the "superintendent's reservoir of credibility is only as deep and wide as the board's perception of his/her recent decisions or recommendations."

Charles L. Cummins Jr., superintendent of the Laurens County School District No. 56 in Clinton, South Carolina, said "people come and go and times change" and superintendents must continually help new members "learn their role and learn operating procedures." A Virginia superintendent said the board in his community has had 27 different members in the last 10 years, requiring him to look constantly after his relationship with the board.

Concern to superintendents

In fact, a survey for this Critical Issues Report found that superintendents generally believe rapid turnover of board members is a major problem. As reported in Chapter 1, the survey showed that superintendents and board presidents both believe that working continually to build and maintain good relationships is necessary. Asked why that is, superintendents cited turnover of board members as the main reason. The fact that any relationship requires constant attention was the second reason that superintendents gave.

Board presidents also were asked why the relationship takes continual work, and the big majority said the reason is that all relationships require attention. Only 1 percent cited board turnover as a reason.

Consultant Richard Foster said in many situations, the board members who hired a superintendent are gone after two to four years. "One of the things that happens (as superintendent) is you look around the table and no one there was present when the board hired you," consultant William Mahoney said. "If no one (on the board) has invested in your success, you have to operate differently."

Superintendents vulnerable

Usdan said what happens is that a group of board members make the decision to hire a superintendent, who is "a reflection of their judgment." Then another group gets elected, and the "superintendent becomes vulnerable because they haven't 'bought in' to that individual." Hentges said a board that hires a superintendent "has a commitment to that relationship that may not be there in a replacement board." Without any personal responsibility for his or her hiring, board members somehow feel more at liberty to remove a superintendent.

Consultant Ira Krinsky said in his experience, "It is pretty unusual for a board to fire a superintendent it hired. Turnover is a critical reason for the increased departure of superintendents."

Husk said nowadays new members tend to start off with a "basic mistrust" of the chief executive, which is sometimes impossible to overcome.

A West Coast superintendent said in five years in office he has had five new board members "with agendas." As a result, it is "very difficult when you don't have continuity and stability" in the board. "You start to get some new initiatives going and then there are new faces."

In some districts, board turnover is rampant, but whether it is increasing across the nation is unclear. One NSBA study in 1989 said the number of members with 10 years or more service had actually increased since the late 1970s. But the IEL report showed that of the board members it surveyed, 95 percent had held office for four years or less. Its survey's representative national sample included 11 percent urban, 54 percent suburban, and 35 percent small town/rural. A survey of urban board members published this year said 50 percent of them had spent five years or less in office, according to the report, "Urban Dynamics."

The type of new members, as much as their number, may be the issue. Cunningham pointed out that "often the change of a single board member can lead to improvement or to radical deterioration in board performance." Given the climate of rising expectations for schools, a few demanding new members may find it relatively easy to win allies for their agendas.

One District's Story

Dealing with Single-Issue Board Members

A growing headache for school boards and superintendents are so-called "single issue" board members who run for office to fulfill one burning desire.

Sometimes their mission is to improve reading instruction or help shape a building project. But often their one mission is a negative, such as keeping taxes down or even getting rid of the superintendent.

In either case, single-issue members usually blame the problem on failure in leadership because of a fundamental misconception: they think the board has been too cooperative with the superintendent, and the proper relationship between boards and superintendents should be *adversarial*.

"These people don't understand the different roles of the board and superintendent, and they come to the board with their own agendas," said Jerry Parker, superintendent of the Pekin School District No. 108, a 4,200-student system near Peoria, Illinois. "Their number is definitely on the increase."

What commonly happens is that these single-issue members tend to be indifferent to the policy-making role of boards and try to intrude into the management of the district to fulfill their campaign promises. The Pekin district, however, has developed a successful system that refocuses their concerns on productive roles and issues that affect the district as a whole.

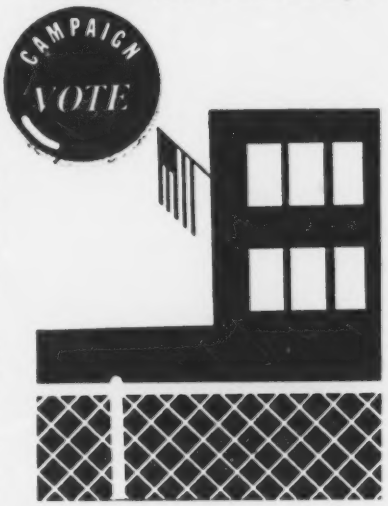
The motivations of single-issue members usually are the best—they want good schools like everyone else. But they usually don't know how to work effectively toward that goal and, at least at the start of their terms, do not have much concern for the overall district and its problems. The result can be friction and frustration all around.

The Pekin school board and Parker haven't always changed the concerns of the new members and haven't always tried. But they have sought to orient them to how school systems function, knowledge that often helps newcomers feel more effective and fulfilled as board members.

Begins before election

The Pekin approach begins not when the new members take office, but long before the election campaigns get into full swing. The board and Parker start out by offering board candidates opportunities to learn more about the system they are seeking to govern.

"We hold orientations for candidates, which includes about six sessions with them, all having to do with the district and education," he said. The board president makes the overture to the candidates, resulting in meetings with board members as well as with Parker.



"We go over a whole array of things, such as the budget, finance, employee contracts, curriculum, the concept of the division of responsibility between the board and superintendent, and, of course, whatever they are interested in," Parker said.

Misconceptions emerge

One of the surprising and potentially destructive realizations that has emerged is that many board candidates have a fundamental misconception about the roles of the board and superintendent in the decision-making process.

"A lot of them have a perception that school systems are like federal and state governments with separate executive and legislative branches," he said. They see the school board as the legislature and the superintendent as the executive, and, as is often the case in federal and state governments, the two branches are perceived as inherently "adversarial."

They frequently have run on the platform that the board has been "duped or coopted" by the superintendent when, they insist, it should be disagreeing with him more.

"We have to explain to them that the superintendent is the chief executive officer of the board and functions on behalf of the board," Parker continued.

"They have come to fear that as board members they shouldn't 'climb in bed' with the superintendent because he is the adversary," he said.

Following an election, Parker and board members go to the candidates who lost and thank them for their willingness to serve on the board and congratulate them on their campaign efforts. "We don't want to burn bridges," he said.

Effort to reach out

The effort by the board and Parker to reach out to candidates and new members goes a long way toward generating trust between them and emerging school leaders in the community, he said.

Then winning candidates are encouraged to attend workshops offered by the Illinois School Boards Association for new school board members throughout the state to help new members understand their responsibilities and roles.

Back in the district, Parker says he and the board president make certain that board agenda materials are understandable for new members. He also distributes a packet of materials weekly to all members on activities in the district and developments in public education.

Within the first two or three months, Parker said, a retreat for board members and administrative staff is held to talk about issues, including those that new members have particular concern about. "If any conflict is going to develop, it is best for it to occur early, and we can then address it at the retreat," he said. A second retreat is held within the first year.

Sometimes, an outside consultant is brought in to guide the retreats but more often the retreats are "run" by one of four staff administrators who have been well-trained for the role, he said.

Within that first year, new single-issue members of the board usually "subordinate their agendas to the more important issues facing the board and district," Parker said. "In 13 years in the district, I've dealt with 25 board members and I've never had one who has left without a positive feeling toward me and the board's accomplishments."

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The effort not only pays off in stronger board-superintendent relationships and more productive boards, he added, but "has resulted in really effective programs for students that were initiated through the contributions of quality board members."

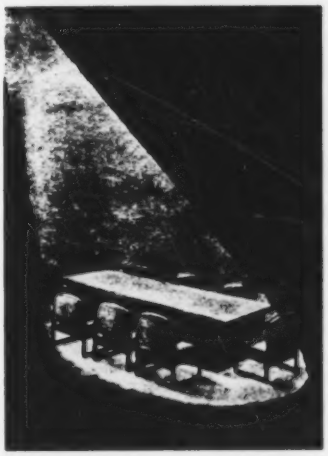
CHAPTER SIX

Selecting the Superintendent:

Where a Good Relationship Can Begin—or End

Relationships between school boards and superintendents don't always "go bad"—as if everything were perfect to begin with and it all deteriorates over time. On the contrary, the seeds for a long, productive partnership are sometimes buried in the selection process—and so are the germs of disaster.

That is the conviction of many people in public education as well as in other areas of the public sector who work with boards and superintendents in guiding the selection process. But this crucial point does not receive the recognition it deserves, they say.



"In too many cases, there has not been a good match to begin with," said Joseph T. Hentges, superintendent of the Woodstock Community Unit School District 200 in Illinois.

intent was to give everyone concerned a better grasp of the problems so they can work effectively toward solving them. The next four chapters will examine in detail ways in which boards and superintendents can work more effectively together.

This chapter will not attempt to cover all facets of the selection process. Excellent materials are available for that purpose, including *Selecting a Superintendent and Talking About the Superintendent's Contract*, two joint publications of AASA and NSBA, and *Becoming a Better Board Member*, an NSBA handbook. Instead, this discussion will emphasize how the selection process can be used to produce long-lasting, harmonious, and collaborative relationships between boards and superintendents.

Start at the beginning

The first step toward building stronger board-superintendent relationships should be taken at the starting point—when the chief executive officer is hired. And that means improving the way that boards choose superintendents—and vice versa. It is also the starting point for this Critical Issues Report's focus on ways to develop more productive relationships between elected school leaders and chief executives.

The preceding chapters have spotlighted many of the factors that cause breakdowns in those relationships. The

Selection process pivotal

The first thing that must be recognized by boards as well as superintendents is the critical importance of the selection process, experts agree. In fact, it can hardly be overstated.

"The price of making the wrong selection is high," *Becoming a Better Board Member* declared. "When good matches are not made, everybody loses. Even if a mismatch is endured until the superintendent's contract expires, the school system will probably suffer from tentative leader-

ship, conflicts and a sense of 'lame duck' management."

Selecting a Superintendent reminds school leaders, "Nothing that the board does is more important than employing and retaining a professionally prepared and dedicated superintendent."

Professor James Guthrie of the University of California at Berkeley put it this way: "It takes maybe five or six hours of time for the decision but it shapes years of administrative behavior." Consultant Charles Raab declared that "the single most important decision of a board is the selection of the superintendent."

David A. Bennett, former superintendent of the St. Paul, Minnesota, public schools, said improved selection is a key to improving the relationships between urban boards and their superintendents. "Urban boards must take a more enlightened approach to seeking potential candidates," he wrote in the *American School Board Journal*. "And the successful candidate must take greater responsibility—*before* accepting the position—to define exactly what the board and superintendent expect of each other."

Problems in the process

But despite the overwhelming importance of the selection process, serious problems persist. In a nutshell, too little time is spent on the process and too little emphasis is placed on doing it well.

"If we could get a handle on these problems, there is no question we would reduce conflict between boards and superintendents significantly," said Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo.

But the lamentable fact is that problems remain.

The essential ingredient of a sound selection process is a full airing of expectations both by the board and superintendent. "But very few boards talk about what is expected of the superintendent," consultant James Huge said. "It amazes me that many [boards and superintendents] never deal with these issues at contract time. That is the origin of a lot of problems [between them]." Guthrie said, "Boards put in a good bit of time in searching out candidates, making trips to their districts, learning a lot, and then sell themselves short by not finding out enough about their own expectations."

Thoroughness is the key

Thoroughness is the key, Huge and others say. A sufficient number of clock hours can be spent on the process, but it won't matter if the quality of that time is deficient. To do it well, they say, means covering some essential topics and covering them in depth.

"In business and industry, they want in-depth assessment," said consultant Vic Cottrell, but he said that most consultants involved in superintendent searches are less thorough. Why? Often because no one wants it done that way, he said. "Superintendents are not accustomed to it, and sometimes the candidates won't put up with it," he said. "The consultant may offer the board a group of candidates, but the board doesn't want to go in-depth on them. Everyone is passing the buck. The board winds up not knowing what they have."

Kenneth Peters, a former consultant, said thoroughness "sets the basis for what is expected of the candidates to make certain that they have carefully looked at the set of requirements that the board adopted."

Huge said the board and superintendent must "talk through what is expected of the other" and "how the superintendent would handle different kinds of situations." Milt Goldberg, director of the Office of Research in the U.S. Department of Education, said boards and candidates "must do everything humanly possible to make their expectations clear." This involves "what they think about key issues, what they think about roles and communication. To the degree they can be clear beforehand, it will result in a successful relationship."

Mary Jason, a board member in the East Jordan, Michigan, Public Schools, said thoroughness can protect board members against all kinds of potentially devastating surprises. She told this story of how doing its homework paid off for her board:

"We had a candidate with great credentials one time. But in the interview, he didn't seem like the same person the credentials conveyed. It was bizarre! So we went to his community, and he didn't match either the credentials or the interview. He had told us how involved he was in the community, how supportive his staff was of him. He said he was proud of his voc ed technical center, which he cited as an example of his leadership. We went to the center and the people there said, 'Oh, yeah, he's the superintendent.' They had to stop a minute to remember who he was. They hadn't seen him in five or six months."

Jason stressed that it is hard for boards to select superintendents because they may have no experience at it, and usually no managerial training. "It is essential that board members attend workshops and learn the techniques for interviewing and selecting superintendents so they feel they are on the same footing."

Lee Etta Powell, superintendent in residence and professor of educational leadership at George Washington University, said there is a fundamental need for the board to reach consensus on the goals for the district and for a

What to Look for in a Superintendent

Making It in an Urban School District

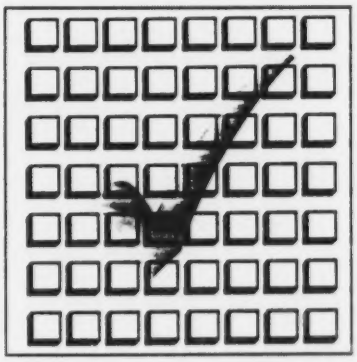
Urban school boards seldom identify all of the qualities it takes to survive the pressure-cooker environment of the superintendency, according to Jonathan C. Wilson, a member of the Des Moines, Iowa, school board and former chairman of NSBA's Council of Urban Boards.

That is one of the reasons these superintendents succumb to the intense demands of the job, he said.

"Over the years, I've seen successful urban superintendents demonstrate a number of characteristics that seem to play a prominent role in their success," he wrote in the *Executive Educator*. These traits may not show up in job descriptions for superintendent searches, he said, but they probably should.

Urban boards may want to include these qualities when they develop their criteria for the selection of their next superintendent—and these days, all boards should probably consider them:

- **An ability to inspire**. A strong vision of the future is needed along with an ability to sell it to the community.
- **Business savvy.** Sophisticated management skills are required to succeed in running what often is the equivalent of a major business enterprise with all its attendant problems and complexities.
- **Sensitivity to diversity.** Superintendents need to come with an abiding sensitivity to the increasingly ethnically diverse student populations and communities, that create a wide spectrum of student and family needs.
- **Self-confidence.** Superintendents need a high degree of self-confidence in handling relations with board members, which may involve the perennial tensions associated with developing strong partnerships.
- **Sensitivity to board members.** Successful superintendents are adroit at recognizing the needs of board members and showing respect for their role as elected community representatives.
- **High energy.** Enthusiasm, optimism, and an unusually large capacity for hard work are hallmarks of "gung ho" superintendents who succeed.
- **Sense of humor**. Having a sense of perspective and proportion allows the superintendent to roll with the punches and to disagree without being disagreeable.



commitment to the success of the superintendent being hired. In addition, the board must be sure the chosen candidate's "professional skills and philosophy are congruent with what the board and community believe they want" in the superintendent. And the candidate must be clear on the requirements of the position, she added.

"There needs to be improvement in the process," Powell said. "When the contract is negotiated, I'm not sure how much the board and superintendent make certain they understand each other."

It also is a "time for reappraisal in many districts, for clarifying the definition and description of the superintendent's role and allowing boards to examine their own functions in regard to the executive," said Professor Luvern L. Cunningham of Ohio State University.

Setting the priorities

The starting point for employing a new chief executive, then, is for the board to look at itself and the district. "Often the selection decision is an opportunity for board members to talk to one another and assess what they have been doing," Professor Paul Thurston of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said. "The board needs to

lay out a clear agenda and a strong commitment to that agenda. It forces the board to shape its educational mission and to review where it has been, which enables them to develop a profile of the new superintendent."

Hiring a superintendent "gives the board a rare opportunity to review and reorder the board's priorities," the publication, *Selecting a Superintendent*, noted. "In changing administrative leadership, the school district's philosophy, its image, its entire educational perspective can also be changed." It offers a chance to make changes "in a rational, systematic way, based on the board's perception of the school district's needs."

The guide advises boards to "take a long, hard look at the goals and priorities of the school system" as the first phase of a carefully developed selection plan. "Determine what changes, if any, should be made. Talk with community leaders, school district staff, parents and students. Determine the school district's future needs. Then determine the kind of person needed to meet them."

Important questions

For instance, does the district need revitalization or innovation, more stability after an unsettled period, or a leader who will extend achieved success?

Develop criteria based on answers to these and other questions, which will be used to assess the candidates and their qualifications, the publication suggests. "Envision the kind of person you want. Include experience, management style, personal traits, communication skills. List the things you would like to see in a superintendent."

The publication also suggests boards leave themselves plenty of time—six months to a year. Boards should realize they have a lot of ground to cover, unless a full-scale search is not needed. Decide when a new superintendent needs to be on the job and then plan ahead, leaving adequate time to meet that objective.

The NSBA publication, *Becoming a Better Board Member*, says that "determining what kind of person your board desires in a superintendent—setting your goals and establishing selection criteria—is the first step in the selection process." It stresses that "you can't be in a position to decide *who* you want, until you know *what* you want."

Objective criteria

While the final selection will be based both on objective and subjective criteria, the NSBA guide says, the primary focus should be on criteria such as experience, management style, and communication skills of the candidate. The book also advises seeking advice from the community and staff, either through some type of survey or by including them on advisory committees. Here are some of the suggested questions to ask in the development of objective criteria:

- What are our overall goals for the district?
- What do the community and staff need and want?
- What financial and personnel resources do we have?
- What kind of educational program is needed to meet state standards and our own goals for the district?

Based on this information, the board then can develop a specific set of goals it wants the new superintendent to accomplish, such as better staff evaluation, improved inservice training, better fiscal management, improvements in the instructional program, better communication with the community, or improved board-superintendent collaboration.

The role of subjectivity

The word "chemistry" often comes to mind when discussing the match between board and superintendent, and it often refers to the way they *feel* about each other. This involves subjective factors used in judging candidates, which the NSBA guide cautions "should be applied only after all of the objective requirements have been satisfied."

After all, the board may find a superintendent it likes very much, but that doesn't necessarily mean the person can do the job. Subjective judgments are bound to play a big part in the final decision, and it helps to deal with them up front. "Although our subjective interpretations cannot be negated, they can be better managed if brought into the open," the guide said.

It might even help for the board to spend time discussing the subjective qualities each member seeks in a new superintendent. This will cause different tastes and preferences to surface so that a compromise can be reached before the process goes forward. Otherwise, hidden differences can cause divisions within the board during the final selection or, even worse, after the hiring is completed.

Something clicks

"So much of the relationship between a board and superintendent comes down to chemistry," Jason said. "In the hiring process, candidates may have equal credentials but there is something about that person [who is selected] that clicks." Jason said the chemistry she referred to is "a blend of human elements which makes up a composite of the ideal person" for the job. "It has to do with 'people skills' and the tone of voice, the physical presence, body

language," she said. "It's not a matter of them being good or bad" but personal preference on the part of board members.

Jason said many boards use these kinds of subjective criteria because a lot of board members have no other experience in hiring and no skills in interviewing. They read through the requirements for the job to see what they said they needed and then check the credentials, the academic training and experience of the candidates. "Past that point, the human factor determines who wins."

A decade of change

AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency* found that more school boards may be basing the selection of superintendents on objective criteria than in the past. In the 1982 study, two-thirds of the superintendents surveyed said they were hired because of "personal characteristics." Such characteristics might reflect the image or role model they presented during interviews for the position as well as information that the boards gained from sources in their previous districts, the study said.

However, in the 1992 report, only 38.5 percent of the superintendents surveyed said they were hired for personal characteristics. "This may reflect a 'maturing' of the profession and perhaps the use of more stringent selection criteria by local boards," the report said. It may be that superintendents in very small districts still are likely to attribute their hiring to personal characteristics, possibly because of the high visibility of superintendents in small communities, the report added.

Before the search begins . . .

Some of the most important decisions must be made by the board long before the search begins. In an article in the *American School Board Journal*, Heller and Jerry J. Herman, superintendent in Greece, New York, said boards need to think carefully about the structure of the process and who will be involved. Not only must the board decide what characteristics it wants in a superintendent but how a list of such qualities should be developed. For instance:

- Should the board make that decision by itself?
- Should a consultant help by meeting with groups of citizens, parents, employees, and students to get their ideas?
- Does the board have a clear vision of where the school system is headed and what leadership characteristics a superintendent needs to get there?
- Will the board, its staff, or a consultant develop a brochure announcing the opening?
- How will the brochure be distributed, where, and to whom?
- Where will the position be advertised?
- How will the initial candidates be screened?
- How will the interviews be conducted?

There are many other questions to be answered, but the point is that all the arrangements should be made beforehand to assure a smooth process. Another early decision has to be on the needs of the school system, said Clythera S. Hornung, a supervisor of curriculum and instruction in the St. Marys School District in Pennsylvania. She wrote in the *American School Board Journal* that boards need to ask themselves questions like these:

- Does the school system face a drastic change in enrollment—either growth or decline—in the coming years?
- Will the school system need to build or renovate buildings?
- Does the economic future of the community appear to be stable, or is it likely to change dramatically?
- Has the school system survived or just completed some great change—such as consolidating with another district or closing several schools—that is likely to create unknown side effects in the near future?

Everybody participates

Consultant George Raab said boards should heavily involve themselves in the search process and guard against asking search consultants, if they are employed, to do too much. The more the board is involved in the selection, the better the marriage between board and superintendent and the longer it lasts, he said. "When a board says to me, 'Narrow the group down,' I say no. If I do it and if the board and superintendent later have trouble, they can blame the one who did the selective screening.

"Consultants should never be used for screening because boards represent cross-sections of communities and they are in a position to judge how candidates will fit into those communities. It is psychologically very important for boards to be heavily involved."

Raab said full participation tends to give the board a personal stake in the superintendent's success. For example, he said, "I always insist on all board members being in on the questioning of the candidates. The ones who don't participate don't seem to have the same vested interest in the superintendent."

Failure of all board members to participate in the

process can lead to a divided board and lack of unified support for the superintendent later, he said. On the other hand, full involvement "can be a unifying experience" for a board, Raab added.

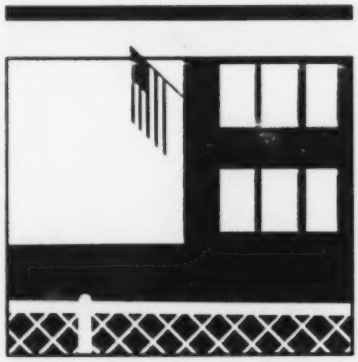
Management style

Mahoney said in his view, the management style of the superintendent is of vital importance in determining the success of the board-superintendent relationship. One thing the board can do before hiring is to make a very careful study of the candidate's management style, he said. "Even if the board likes someone, it shouldn't hire that person if it doesn't like the style."

Jason said the board needs to be able to predict the superintendent's reaction to various situations and know

Probing Questions for Superintendent Candidates

- What criteria would you use in evaluating an educational program?
- What major problems have you faced in your present or previous administrative positions and how did you solve those problems?
- How have you improved the school system now under your direction?
- How would you improve the abilities of a professional staff?
- Have you been successful in gaining support from voters for levies and bond issues?
- What is your concept of the role of the board and of the superintendent?
- How would you keep the public informed of the work of the school system?
- What do you consider to be your greatest assets, abilities, and weaknesses?
- During your first year as superintendent, how might you go about determining the strengths and weaknesses of this district?
- The board feels that (number) major problems confronting this district are (describe them). How would you deal with each?
- In addition to handling these problems, the board would like the superintendent to undertake the following projects (describe them). Please give us some idea of how you might handle these projects.



- In your judgment, what are the most important functions of the superintendent? Describe your experiences in handling each of these functions.
- Give us some idea of how you judge your own effectiveness as a superintendent. How would you expect the board to evaluate your work?
- A superintendent is expected to handle a variety of responsibilities. Which one do you feel most qualified to handle? Why? With which one are you least comfortable? Why?
- What have you done to upgrade the educational programs in schools under your supervision? How have you evaluated the results?
- What kinds of staff development programs have you been involved in?
- What kind of understanding would you hope to establish between the board and yourself in order to administer this district effectively?
- Describe your background in budget preparation and business administration.
- How have you been involved in collective bargaining?
- How should the public be involved in school-related matters?
- What educational programs at the state and federal levels do you consider most significant at this time?

—Selecting a Superintendent, joint publication of AASA and NSBA

whether he or she is a "detail person or a big-picture person," and the successes and failures he or she has experienced.

A good way to find out what a candidate's management style is like is to talk to people in the community where the person is serving, Mahoney said.

Board style

Professor Malcolm Katz of Georgia Southern College, a former superintendent, thinks of it in terms of administrative styles, which he says are exhibited by both the superintendent and the board. In the case of boards, he identifies their styles in two broad categories: corporate and familial, the one being more formal and the other more informal.

His article in the *American School Board Journal* lists these characteristics of a "corporate" school board:

- Makes decisions in a rational, predictable way based on solid information.
- Likes carefully developed, informative reports.
- Has sophisticated understanding of policy, knows how to execute it, and communicates it through the chain of command.
- Works as a group rather than as a collection of individuals, looking to its own standards rather than constituent wishes.
- Prefers the board table for doing business.
- Wants a leader who emphasizes goal setting, long-range planning, and achieving goals over the long term.

The "familial" school board has these characteristics:

- Makes decisions in a more personalized, less predictable way.
- Favors informal, oral communications over polished reports.
- Varies in its understanding and use of policy, depending on the situation.
- Operates more on an individual rather than group basis, keeping close ties with constituencies.
- Likes to reach decisions at informal gatherings.
- Favors informal, verbal approaches to planning over formal goals and objectives.

Matching styles

The administrative styles of school superintendents are similar, with one preferring tasks and structure and the other personal relationships and informality, he said.

Katz argues that a blend of both styles is necessary for superintendents to be successful, but typically one will be dominant, which means that matching styles should be a priority in searches. "When the board and the superintendent are mismatched—a corporate school board with a relationship-oriented superintendent, or a familial school board with a task-oriented superintendent—misunderstandings and friction often result," he said.

The question is, can school boards and superintendents determine their own styles in order to seek good matches in the selection process? And when mismatches occur, can either side compensate by adjusting their styles? Katz thinks the answer is yes in both cases.

Self-assessment to determine style can be made a part of the criteria normally developed for a search process, and superintendents can assess their own characteristics beforehand, he said. They can use available tests and checklists or the assistance of experts in the field. And if a mismatch does occur, making conscious efforts to adjust one's style can help a great deal, Katz added.

You'd be surprised how ill-prepared some boards are for interviews. If the board used a questionnaire or writing exercises in the earlier screening, some of the same questions can be used in the interviews, but more elaborate answers should be sought.

The interview

The interview is probably the most critical part of the process and requires careful and extensive preparation. The AASA-NSBA guide, *Selecting a Superintendent*, advises each board member to review thoroughly the backgrounds of the candidates and any screening reports as well as the hiring criteria before starting on interviews.

Hornung urges boards to develop a set of questions for the interviews. "You'd be surprised how ill-prepared some boards are for interviews," she said. If the board used a questionnaire or writing exercises in the earlier screening, some of the same questions can be used in the interviews, but more elaborate answers should be sought.

The same questions should be used for all interviews so answers can be compared among the candidates, and

boards should not forget to craft questions so they address district needs as well as general issues in education.

Hornung also urges boards to allow plenty of time for interviews, ranging from one hour to 90 minutes for each. They should all be conducted within about 10 days and held during the daytime, evenings and weekends. "Seeing all candidates on the same day, or on successive days, will bring more uniformity into this process," said Brian O'Connell, president of the Independent Sector, an umbrella organization of 800 nonprofit organizations.

With the permission of the candidates, the interviews should be taped for later review and comparisons by the board. Again, as Raab has recommended, all board members should be present for each of the interviews.

Questions: specific and consistent

Questions should be specific and consistent, Matika advises, allowing the board president to move from topic to topic during the interviews. Each question should be phrased identically. A useful tool is an interview guide, listing the questions for each member with space for notes. The notes will be useful for later discussions about the candidates. It would be a good idea to have the board's attorney review the questions before the interviews to make certain they are legally proper.

In Cottrell's approach, each of the candidates is asked the same set of questions, their answers are videotaped and then the tapes are compared. They also are asked to respond to different kinds of hypothetical situations. For example, a candidate is asked, "You make a decision which looks right but later it appears to have been faulty. Yet the board does not like to change. What would you do?" O'Connell said he finds it useful "to describe real-life situations in the organization and to ask the candidate almost as though he were an organization consultant to share ideas for dealing with those situations."

Cottrell said the same set of questions asked of the candidates is also asked of board members so the candidates can learn more about the board. Then the answers are matched to compare the styles of the candidates with those of the board members.

But there is wide agreement that only board members—not consultants—should interview candidates. They can help the board prepare questions and can sit in to monitor interviews so they can offer advice later, but consultants should never do the interviewing themselves.

Community visits

Visits to the home communities of the finalists or at least the leading candidate are highly recommended by many consultants, board members and superintendents. The visits can be a big help to boards in getting a full picture of candidates because "the fact is that some candidates are more skilled at the interview process than others," said the guide, *Selecting a Superintendent*.

The board or a committee of the board should talk with board members in the home community along with the school staff, community leaders, parents, the clergy, people in the street, the chamber of commerce, service club officers, political leaders, the media, and possibly even the candidates' families, the guide said.

Along the way, O'Connell said he thinks the board or committee should "candidly explain any reservations [it] has about the individual in terms of gaps in experience, possible weak areas, a questionable reference check, and the like." In this way, the candidate may screen himself or herself out, helping the board trim the list. It's not an easy thing to do, O'Connell acknowledged, but "better to learn it at this stage than later."

Scores vs. instincts

During the interviews, O'Connell suggests using a scoring sheet containing the personal attributes and skills needed in a successful candidate. The board or committee then rates each candidate on an 0 to 5 scale. He advises doing the rating just after the interview. After the interviews are completed, the scores can be compared.

It may produce surprises. "I don't suggest that the scores will necessarily contradict instinct, but you will be fascinated by the fact that some candidates who didn't seem very impressive will come up with good scores," he said. "This leads to a much more objective discussion of the candidates in relation to the skills and attributes you are really looking for."

He said that in his experience, when this more orderly method is used, the committee members will end up hiring someone who would not have been their first choice if left to their own instincts. "I would further guess that they would agree then and two years later that their instincts, to some extent, had deceived them." The point is, "good judgment is based on sound analysis, and sound analysis is based on accurate data."

Hiring from within

A prickly problem that sometimes arises involves whether to hire someone within the district and forgo a search. This is a question that should be answered before a search process is launched because if the board favors a candidate

from within the district, it is a waste of time and money to conduct a wide-scale search.

"If you have your mind made up already because there is an outstanding candidate from within the district ready to step into the superintendency, don't undertake the charade of a nationwide search," the AASA-NSBA guide says. "It's costly. It's demeaning to the person you want in the first place. And it almost certainly will be exposed for what it is . . . a charade."

It is a delicate matter, the guide acknowledges, because while the board wants to reward superior service with promotion to maintain staff enthusiasm and morale, it should avoid engaging in "provincialism, complacency, stagnation, and politics."

Candidates have a role

It is rarely emphasized strongly enough, but the candidates themselves also should engage in similar types of evaluation activities during the search process to check out the boards, their characteristics, goals, and accomplishments. Some consultants say that candidates frequently fall down in this area.

"Both the board and the superintendent are sloppy in how they hire and how they take jobs," Heller said. "Often the candidate gets psyched up about getting a job and winds up overlooking many things. If the relationship doesn't work out, it sometimes is the superintendent's own fault."

Consultant Deane Wiley said some superintendents take positions "without knowing much about them because of survival and desperation." They take this blind leap for a variety of reasons, including a breakdown in relations with the boards, a driving passion for higher salary, or a desire to relieve boredom. "Sometimes anything looks better than where they are," Wiley said.

But they also do it for the challenge of taking on tougher assignments, he said. Some are top-notch leaders who choose to leave comfortable positions for difficult jobs. "They are high risk-takers and they do well," Wiley said. They realize completely that they probably won't be able to last for more than a few years, but "they are so secure that they think if I do what I think I can do, I'll have no trouble getting another job."

Egos get in the way

Of course, Heller said, to be successful, superintendents need a high self-concept. But "they sometimes let their egos get in the way when approaching a new job, thinking they can be successful anywhere, and a lot of them take the wrong job."

Consultant Kenneth Underwood said "superintendents have to have egos but they have to be suppressed. They really believe they can do it all."

Wiley said some superintendents "have more fun in the chase than in the capture" of the job. He said "their egos are such that they will go after a position tooth and nail," giving less consideration to the nature of the job itself. "Some like to gain bragging rights that they got a job in the first 24 hours [of the process]," he said. "They just like to move around as long as the progression of money is there." However, "they soon wake up and feel vaguely discontented" and start thinking about applying for another position.

Interviewing the board

Superintendent Thomas Payzant, of the San Diego City School District, said the hiring interview can be invaluable for a superintendent. "I always said the most important time I spent with a board was during the interview," he said. "It is essential that the candidate has time to interview the board." During those interviews and discussions, the superintendent should make sure that the "ground rules" for his contract term are made clear.

Selecting a Superintendent stresses that "an interview with a prospective superintendent should be a two-way street," allowing plenty of time for both to assess each other. "A candidate who will take the job without asking penetrating questions about board-superintendent relations probably will not be the best candidate," the guide said. "A good candidate will ask for assurances of a free hand in shaping his or her management priorities, in forming a management team and in making management decisions. If a good candidate does not feel that a satisfactory working relationship can be developed between the superintendent and the board, he or she will probably decide not to take the job, even if it is offered."

It gives the candidates a chance to explore the goals, priorities and problems of the school district and to match the job potential against his or her career goals. It also provides an opportunity to evaluate the caliber of board members as individuals and their relationship with the existing superintendent.

Watch for problem boards

One way that candidates assess boards is to check out their reputations among other superintendents and admin-

istrators. And reputations can influence the quantity and quality of applications for a position, says Sidney A. Freund, superintendent of the Oyster Bay-East Norwich Central School District in New York. "When superintendents meet, they talk, compare notes, and discuss job openings," he wrote in the *American School Board Journal*. "And word about 'bad' school systems travels fast."

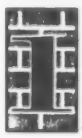
Rarely does "bad" have to do with size, salary, location, test scores, socioeconomic status of the community, and so forth, he said. It often means the school board "has a reputation for being difficult, if not impossible, to work with."

Freund advises superintendent-candidates to be on the lookout for problem boards, which he believes fall into four main types:

9 Tips for Selecting a Top Superintendent

To achieve a successful selection process, school boards should learn from the mistakes of others, says Francis W. Matika, executive director of Beaver Valley Intermediate Unit No. 27 in Aliquippa, Pennsylvania.

Here are some important points he has learned from participating as a consultant in many superintendent searches:



Don't criticize the former superintendent. An acrimonious departure of a superintendent can discourage candidates, so it should be handled evenly. Candidates will likely find out the circumstances surrounding the superintendent's departure, which argues for the board being open and frank about why the vacancy occurred.

Advertise for applicants. Advertise the position locally and nationally in newspapers and professional publications and elsewhere because word of mouth carries only so far. Prepare a brochure describing the job requirements to provide a full picture of the district and the ideal candidate.

Invest enough money in the search. Limiting search efforts to save funds is a false economy, considering the importance of the task. Hiring an experienced consultant to guide the search can be a sound investment.

Specify the selection criteria. Be specific about the kind of superintendent being sought in terms of professional background, creative skills, interpersonal skills, management abilities, academic qualifications, relationships with previous school boards and staff members, community involvement, ability to direct the curriculum, and communications and leadership skills. Time spent by the board in developing the criteria is time well spent.

Don't be evasive about salary. To avoid confusion, state as clearly as possible the salary level for the position, using such phrases as "salary in the middle $70,000s" or "a salary in excess of $70,000." And remember, you get what you pay for.

ing any pool of candidates takes time, but they should be scrutinized carefully based on the objective criteria that have been agreed on. A careful review of their qualifications will help assure that the semifinalists are worthy of consideration.

Honor the confidentiality of all applicants. Good candidates can be lost through breaches of confidentiality. It pays to conduct the search with discretion, care, and sensitivity.

Don't let someone else make the board's decision. Seeking suggestions and ideas from the community and staff for the search criteria is valuable, but the board should make it clear throughout that involvement is strictly advisory and the board has the responsibility for the final decision.

Interview with dignity. The board should demonstrate dignity, order, professionalism and courtesy during the interviews because the board is being judged by the candidates as well.

• **A divided board.** Most superintendents welcome differing opinions among board members as a healthy sign of diversity. But if the board always votes 4-3 or 5-4, it's a signal that political factors, personality clashes, or personal interests may dominate board decision making.

• **A board that doesn't respect confidentiality.** Open meeting laws must be obeyed, but some information is considered privileged and should be discussed only in closed session. A superintendent must be able to trust that board members will keep confidential information given them in confidence. Otherwise, the effectiveness of the entire school system can be jeopardized.

• **A closed-minded board.** Some boards are unwilling to evaluate or accept new ideas. These are typically marked by single-issue members with one subject or goal in mind. If the board is dominated by such members, it can paralyze decision making and make it almost impossible for the superintendent to lead.

• **A board that won't separate policy and management roles.** A red light should flash if a board has trouble distinguishing between its proper policy-making role and the superintendent's responsibility for administration or policy implementation. If the board has a past history of involving itself in routine administrative matters, thereby undermining the authority of the superintendent, candidates should think twice about applying for a position there.

References—and then some

Once the candidates are narrowed down to a group of finalists, their references should be checked thoroughly. "I don't put much stock in listed references, although I do contact them and ask pointed questions," O'Connell said. "I put much more stock in my telephone conversations with past supervisors. I've learned the hard way that most references and supervisors want to be helpful to the candidate, if only to be rid of him or her. Accept that this can be the relationship, and therefore work very hard to get down to the facts."

O'Connell said it usually is helpful to remind supervisors of the importance of the position to the institution when seeking their candor about candidates. Supervisors, of course, will be board members in the case of superintendents seeking another superintendency, or superintendents and possibly other school managers in the case of administrators seeking to move up to the superintendency. "One of the points that I use is that even if the person is hired, I want to know what skills or attributes will need strengthening," he said. "This is not only truthful and helpful, it is often the key to opening up discussion of possible weaknesses."

O'Connell said he often has been on the other side of reference calls from people considering CEO candidates and "with very few exceptions, I am appalled at how cursory the review is. As a consequence, I rarely have to be as candid as I would be if the questioning were sharp. This tells me that most people have made up their minds but still want to go through the steps of clearance without having their decision shaken. My approach is to shake the daylights out of my judgment. I'd rather face the error at that stage than when the person is on the job."

Always check them

Some candidates require that references not be checked unless they become a semifinalist or finalist. They do not want their candidacies known by their present employers at the early stages of the process. This is understandable and should be acceptable, O'Connell said, but it should be made clear that reference-checking will have to be completed before a final decision is made. The problem is that the board may feel so good about choosing a candidate that it will pass up the reference-checking altogether.

O'Connell urged boards to avoid falling into this trap because, at least in his nonprofit field, "there are many inefficient people in it, many of whom contradict their low level of general performance by being superior at selling themselves in job interviews."

Involving the community

A growing practice in the selection process is the involvement of people from the local community. But it remains a sensitive issue among boards, particularly how much involvement, says NSBA's *Becoming a Better Board Member*.

"Boards are divided on the question of whether citizen and staff participation in the selection process is really desirable, and are even more sharply divided on the question of the structure that assistance should take when community or staff involvement is allowed," it said.

On the pro side, the argument is that boards might as well involve their communities because local people are going to demand it anyway. Others say the development of

job requirements leads to a healthy discussion of school issues facing the community, and participation by community people helps smooth that process.

On the con side, "there are just too many people to please" and if someone feels left out, it can rebound against the board. If the community gets too involved, it can raise the issue of who the superintendent owes allegiance to.

Many others think community involvement is a must, and that it helps build support for the schools and the superintendent. "The board should spend a lot of time with the community and staff on what it is looking for in a superintendent," consultant Richard Foster said. After the selection, community involvement proves valuable because "everyone feels they were in the process and they can see evidence of their work and what is important to them."

Letters to communities

Raab recommends that the board send letters to the school staff and community leaders asking what it should be looking for in a new superintendent. Other consultants have suggested that the letters should ask what they expect of the new superintendent and what they expect of the board and the superintendent acting together to achieve the goals of the district. If a consultant is being used, Raab said, the replies should be directed to him or her to obtain a more honest and complete expression of their wishes.

The summarized results should then be passed on to the board. He cautioned, however, that the letter writers should not be contacted directly because this might destroy the confidentiality under which they agreed to share their views. Overall, he said, community participation in the process can be a "very unifying thing for the board and the community."

The NSBA guide said besides using consultants to write letters or hold meetings with staff and community groups, some boards schedule public meetings for comment on the process. Most boards contact business and civic groups, parent organizations, advocacy groups, teachers, other staff members, and students.

Three areas of involvement

Community involvement usually is sought in three major areas, NSBA says:

1. **Goal setting.** People usually have a lot to say about what is wrong with the schools and what needs to be done, which will help the board review or reshape its goals as a basis for developing selection criteria.

2. **Screening applicants.** Boards sometimes appoint staff-community committees to screen applicants. If they are used, they should undergo some training in the process and clear ground rules for their participation should be laid down. And they should be used only in initial screening, with the board conducting the rest of the review.

3. **Interviewing candidates**. Many boards now are involving staffs and communities in the interviewing, and some even are holding open forums for listening to and meeting candidates. The aim is to get more public participation in the process than traditional methods have allowed.

"Make absolutely certain that you first formulate, adopt and publicize formal ground rules which include an understanding that all citizens or staff action is advisory, that the responsibility for the resolution of all questions is expressly the board's and that the board will make the final decision."

Some superintendents said they have enjoyed the interviewing because it gave them a better assessment of the communities, and it helped them win public support for future benefit.

NSBA has these suggestions for community involvement in the selection process:

- The board should make the final choice.
- No community or staff group should have veto power over any candidate.
- The board should seek comments, not endorsements.
- Comments should be received from individuals.
- Don't allow the staff or the community to usurp the board's role by taking straw polls or pooling comments.

In short, "make absolutely certain that you first formulate, adopt and publicize formal ground rules which include an understanding that all citizen or staff action is advisory, that the responsibility for the resolution of all questions is expressly the board's and that the board will make the final decision," NSBA said.

There is a danger, however, that some candidates won't participate in a process with community interviewing, and others will pull out early. The result can be a loss of the best candidates. One way to reduce this threat is to engage in public interviews only at the end of the process involving the finalists, who should be more likely to accept the activity at that point.

Consultants: yes or no?

Using an outside consultant to assist the board in the search process is a wise investment, most believe, but nearly two-thirds of boards go it alone. AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency* found that 62 percent of the boards conducted their own searches, 14 percent employed professional search firms, 11 percent used the services of state school board associations and about 13 percent used other individuals or agencies.

The smaller the district, the more likely the board will conduct its own search. The 1992 study found in its survey that about 76 percent of districts under 300 enrollment and 71 percent of those between 300 and 3,000 enrollment handled searches themselves. About 52 percent of districts in the 3,000-25,000 enrollment range conducted their own searches, but among districts with more than 25,000 students, only 38 percent did, the study said.

When districts undertake a search on their own, they typically form a search committee of board members who work with the school staff to draw up a job description and job-opening announcement. These are distributed to universities, state associations, and newspapers. The board then meets and decides which of the applicants it will interview.

Mahoney said in his view, most of the nation's school boards that don't use consultants in the selection process "don't do it well." Hentges said most boards "don't have the expertise to identify the skills they need, and they lack the means to do the necessary paperwork."

What the doctor ordered

Becoming a Better Board Member says a consultant "might be just what the doctor ordered" to achieve a fruitful hiring process. "Even if your board can attract plenty of candidates, it may need technical guidance," it said, because consultants can be especially helpful in planning an objective process.

Besides screening the initial pool of candidates, consultants can verify resumes, do preliminary reference checks, conduct community surveys and help design applications and interview forms, ads, brochures, and other materials required for a sound search, it said.

The experts agree: Peters said consultants "can be extremely helpful by setting up the criteria for the position and making sure the process is thorough and complete." Thurston said consultants are in a unique position to communicate with both the board and the superintendent and to shape discussions between them to a productive end. Underwood noted that consultants can be good at exposing "hidden agendas" that could be destructive to the future relationship between a board and superintendent.

Choosing a consultant

Consultants vary widely in experience, track records, and how appropriate their particular backgrounds are for any given board search. Rather than settle for the first one that is suggested or is available, boards should shop around. It also helps to just talk to a number of consultants to help broaden the board's thinking about the whole process, NSBA says.

Whether employing them for the search process, for supervising retreats or for counseling boards and superintendents with relationship problems, consultants should be hired as carefully as anyone would be for an important mission, Peters said. "Start with their track record, their background, and experience," he said. "Make contact with boards and districts where they have worked, look at their results and interview them. Unfortunately, the common practice is to call a university or an association and ask who is doing consulting there and leave it at that."

One good method for selecting a consultant is to ask for a proposal spelling out exactly what services will be offered, the time line involved, and the cost, *Selecting a Superintendent* said. Boards also should obtain several proposals from consultants for comparison.

The early stages of the search process are crucial, in Wiley's view, because that is when the top candidates should be identified. A good consultant should have the experience and contacts in all parts of the country to be able to check on candidates, using his or her own network of knowledgeable people to ask, "What do you know about this person?"

Watch out for "stables"

Wiley said he is running into more boards today that balk at hiring those consultants who seem to have their own "stables" of candidates—a relatively unchanging group of

superintendents brought in whenever the consultant gets a job. In some cases, these are former students of college professors who themselves serve as search consultants to school boards.

These boards feel that such consultants restrict the field of potential candidates when they rely heavily on their own stables, Wiley said. And boards also see themselves being "manipulated," so that "down the road their superintendents will be pulled out by the consultant as candidates for other jobs," resulting in a shorter stay in the position, he added.

Making the decision

The keys to judging candidates are their records of accomplishments where they are serving now, and their motivations for wanting the position that is open. "You find out why they want to work for that school district and what they see in the position that causes them to look favorably on it," Wiley said. "You check to see if they have investigated the position, read the criteria to see how it compares with what they want, and whether they have been in the community to find out what it is like. All that separates out the people who are just looking for a job."

The underlying reason for the importance of the early stage of investigating candidates is that in the end, Wiley said, the board's decision probably will wind up to be subjective—like it or not. "When you get down to the last few candidates, nothing makes any difference except whether the board members like a person, whether they feel good about someone, whether they feel they can work with that person," he said. "It's a lousy way to pick a superintendent, but it's usually done with gut feeling."

Roles in writing the contract

The contract emerging from this process has many facets, but the one that directly affects board-superintendent relations in action concerns roles and responsibilities. Every candidate probably thinks about roles as an issue when being hired, but some overlook the need to address it through discussion and negotiation at contract time.

"It's carelessness on the part of the superintendent," Hentges said. "The candidate may feel he is being hired to run a district and he assumes too much—that everyone knows what their roles are and that everything is going to be fine." He said he was unprepared to think carefully about roles when he became a superintendent. "I don't recall anyone ever cautioning me about roles," Hentges said. "I had been told the board makes policy and the superintendent administers it, and I thought that was a real clear thing." Using a sample AASA contract, boards and superintendents should agree on language to reflect their understanding of their respective roles, consultants say.

For instance, AASA's *Sample Contract* states that the superintendent shall have charge of the administration of the schools under the direction of the board with appropriate elaboration of those responsibilities. It also says the superintendent "shall select all personnel subject to the

Confused Roles Are Not Always an Oversight

In virtually every state, laws governing the operation of public school districts describe the legal responsibilities of the school board and the superintendent: the board is charged with developing policies that govern the district and the superintendent with administering those policies. Those responsibilities are not always spelled out in sufficient detail, but the idea behind them is clear enough.

So why is there conflict over those roles? For one thing, superintendents sometimes do not nail down in contracts the responsibilities that the state laws assign to them and, as one superintendent put it, "they give it away. . . I suppose because they were willing to do anything to get the job."

For another, some school boards refuse to abide by the delineation of responsibilities contained in state laws. In one district recently, the board's top choice to fill the superintendent's position refused to sign a contract spelling out the proper roles of the board and superintendent as defined in state law. The board simply passed over that candidate and hired a second choice who agreed to sign a contract that did not delineate clear roles.

The lesson is that when there is confusion over the roles of boards and superintendents, it is not always an oversight or an accident.

approval of the board" and that "the board, individually and collectively, shall promptly refer all criticisms, complaints, and suggestions called to its attention to the superintendent for study and recommendation."

Central points like these should be included in the contract, either stated explicitly or represented in references to state statutes that spell out roles in the law. During negotiations, Huge urged the board and superintendent to go over the contract "point by point and discuss where they need to clarify things and reach agreement. Too often, they say we understand what this means, without really understanding."

Details, details. . .

Not all of the many complexities and details surrounding their roles obviously can be included in a contract, joint AASA-NSBA publications say. So in their discussions about their leadership responsibilities the board and superintendent agree to policies that describe these roles in greater detail, using examples if necessary.

"Policies should clearly define the differences between policy and administrative functions," *Selecting a Superintendent* says. "Policies should specify the superintendent's obligation to keep the board informed. Policies should spell out, in writing, rules and regulations for school district governance and for school board operation." And they should be constantly reviewed and updated, the guide added.

Superintendents and board presidents surveyed for this Critical Issues Report expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the way the board-superintendent relationship was set forth in their employment contracts. The approval totals: superintendents, 92 percent; board presidents, 81 percent. The 10 percent of superintendents who said the contracts could have been improved suggested clearer and more specific language, more detailed descriptions of their evaluation, and more board-superintendent goals. The board presidents offered similar suggestions.

Is the pool shrinking?

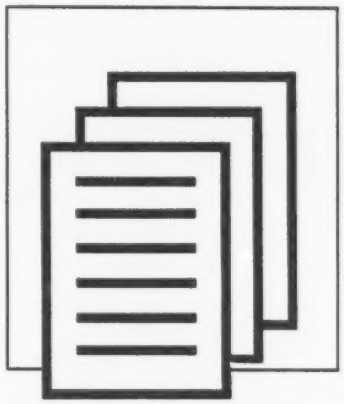
The foregoing should help improve the match between boards and superintendents, but other factors beyond the control of boards also can affect the number and quality of candidates that will apply. Some consultants report that the overall pool has shrunk over the years, giving boards fewer candidates to choose from when searching for replacements. But there seems to be no hard evidence to support that perception.

Professor Thomas Glass of Northern Illinois University, who compiled the 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency*, said it may be that fewer superintendents are applying for jobs because the stability of school districts in general has increased since the enrollment declines of the 1970s and early 1980s—at least until the financial hardships of recent years. He also said economic concerns of changing jobs, working spouses, and being locked into non-transferable state retirement programs also could be contributing factors.

But it is likely that the number of applicants will still vary according to the district and what it has to offer. It's probably true, as it always has been, Glass said, that "the more desirable the job, the more candidates for it."

It All Starts With the Contract:

They Know Their Roles and Stick to Them



The Berryessa Union School District in San Jose, California, considers itself a rarity among American school systems in one important respect: the roles of its school board and superintendent are crystal clear.

This is no accident. The board and superintendent designed it that way from the very beginning, and they work hard to avoid the confusion and misunderstandings that plague boards and superintendents in some other districts.

Biefke Vos Saulino, the superintendent, was hired by the Berryessa district with clearly defined roles uppermost in her mind. And the board, whose last three superintendents' contracts were not renewed, was looking for a fresh approach. Board intrusion into administration had a history in the district, a tradition the board was seeking to break.

"I said right off that we needed to have a good arrangement so problems wouldn't develop between us," Vos Saulino recalled. "And the board—with several holdover members and three new ones—realized things needed to change."

In a way, she said, inexperience was an asset. It was her first superintendency, and crafting a clearly defined contract was new to the board members. Together they learned how to build a relationship that met their objectives. "Through the board-superintendent development process, I felt I could work with them successfully," she said.

Begin with the contract

"I believed that first we needed a contract to specify our expectations," Vos Saulino said. "not to refer back to so much but as a place to begin discussions." She could find no model for the kind of thorough document she wanted, so she set about constructing one.

Indeed, she says in retrospect, there cannot and should not be a model for everyone to follow. Each contract should reflect the goals and objectives in which the board and superintendent have invested their own ideas and convictions.

The starting point was a contract developed by the board's attorney under which the district's past superintendents had been employed. "It was technically adequate but did not cover roles," Vos Saulino said. "I said no to that."

"I then talked to a lot of fellow superintendents and found out what to do, based on their experiences," she said. On their advice, she obtained *A Sample Contract* from AASA and began to adapt it to her and the board's objectives.

Clear, specific language

The superintendents and AASA staff members she talked to recommended that the contract contain very clear and specific language in "all areas of potential controversy," especially "who does what," such as the board being responsible for policy and the superintendent being in charge of all personnel decisions. The areas they emphasized included compensation, duties, vacation and other benefits, professional growth, and evaluation, especially how and when it will be performed, she said.

Armed with this information, Vos Saulino said she spent three lengthy meetings with the board negotiating the contract. "We went over many, many situations that dealt with roles," she said. "For instance, I said, 'When you (board members) get a call from parents. What do you do?' I said, 'You are hiring me to handle these things. If not, you don't need a superintendent.'

Although these examples of potential conflicts over roles were not written into the contract, Vos Saulino said she preserved the "table notes" of the conversations. She attached them to the contract for future reference in case

of differences over what had been agreed to. "I hold them to it (the contract)," she added.

Vos Saulino said she also reviews these agreements with individual members and the full board "whenever I get the chance." She also sends members "thank you notes" whenever they refer complaints to her and then she reminds them, "Aren't you glad you hired me to take care of these problems?" Then she follows up by reporting how the complaints were resolved. "Board members tell me now that they rarely receive complaint calls because people are getting used to the superintendent handling them."

Board appreciates definition

She said the board liked the clear definition of roles in the contract "because it made a great deal of sense." Board president Susan Brooks agreed. "If board members start getting wrapped up in programs and personnel, they're going to lose the overall picture that the board should focus on," she said. "It depends on whether members come on the board with an agenda or want to meddle in site decisions. Then they might feel uncomfortable (with the clear roles)."

Still, even though the roles are spelled out in writing and are frequently discussed, questions about them are never completely resolved, Brooks said. "It is because they are inherently unclear and you have to keep defining them and their parameters," she said.

But Vos Saulino has made it clear, Brooks added, that if the board fails to live up to the terms of the agreement on roles, the board will have to look for another superintendent.

Contract provisions

The final contract contains these key provisions:

• The legal basis and definition of the role of the superintendent to serve as chief executive officer of the governing board, as stated in the California Education Code.

• The authority of the superintendent under the code to make all personnel decisions and a requirement that board policies be in conformance with the code in this regard are contained in this language: "All powers and duties which may lawfully be delegated to the superintendent are to be performed and executed by the superintendent in accordance with the policies adopted by the governing board. These policies shall include a complete position description and are hereby incorporated herein by reference."

• The duties of the superintendent are spelled out in this way: "In said capacity, the superintendent shall do and perform all services, acts, or things necessary or advisable to manage and conduct the business of the district, subject at all times to applicable state and federal laws and the policies set by the governing board, and subject to the consent of the governing board when required by the terms of this agreement or by board ordinances, policies, rules or applicable law."

Then this specific description of roles: "In this regard, the governing board and the superintendent agree that the governing board shall be responsible for the promulgation and development of policies to govern the district, and that the superintendent shall be responsible for the implementation and monitoring of those policies."

Also included is a method for addressing problems: "Annually, the governing board shall provide the superintendent with the opportunity to review superintendent-governing board relationships for the purpose of enabling both parties to discuss perceived concerns. . ." In actual practice, meetings for this purpose are held four times a year, and although the contract does not call for it, board members evaluate themselves and each other on these occasions. "The focus is always on what individual members can do to work effectively as a unit and to work with me as a team, so that the mission and goals of the district can be realized," Vos Saulino said.

• The authority of the superintendent to assign and reassign personnel is covered in this: "In accordance with governing board policy and the education laws of the state of California, the superintendent shall have complete freedom to organize, reorganize and arrange the administrative and supervisory staff in the manner in which, in the superintendent's judgment, best serves the district."

• The contract requires that "the governing board shall evaluate in writing the performance of the superintendent at least once a year during the term of this agreement. Said evaluation shall be related to the position description of the superintendent and the goals and objectives of the district." Although not specified in the contract, a self-evaluation by Vos Saulino has been added.

• The contract also requires that annually "the governing board shall meet to establish district goals and objectives for the school year. Said goals and objectives shall be reduced to writing and be among the criteria by which the superintendent is evaluated as herein provided."

Like all school districts, Berryessa has its share of problems, but confusion over board-superintendent roles is not one of them. Thus a big part of what troubles some school districts has been eliminated.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Evaluation Process:

Helping To Build Stronger Relationships

Evaluation—would a name change help?

"The word 'evaluation' has traditionally had a threatening ring, especially for those being evaluated," according to a joint AASA-NSBA publication, *Evaluating the Superintendent*. If evaluation involves a relationship where cooperation and collaboration are essential, such as with a board of education and a superintendent, merely going through the process can be shattering.

It's safe to say that in many people's minds the word evaluation conjures up a negative image of an employee facing a performance review with a salary increase—or even decrease—at stake. Although the review may turn out to be positive and beneficial to the employee, there is the fear of a potentially punitive outcome because evaluation has often been associated with criticism—and usually not of the constructive type. Few things are more unsettling, if not downright threatening.

Abuse of the process

School board members and superintendents are like most people. They tend to shy away from doing things they think might be unpleasant. And, in fact, evaluation often has been used in a critical, negative way between employers and employees in organizations, including school districts.

Consultant James Huge said some boards abuse the process by conveying the attitude that "we're out to get the superintendent." Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo said too often boards "see evaluation as a system to 'get' people—they see it as a negative—rather than as a growth system to identify strengths and weaknesses and to build on strengths."

As a result, evaluations still are not being performed as often and as well as they should be, although a growing number of states are requiring evaluation of superintendents by boards and many more boards are conducting them on their own. In addition, more boards are evaluating themselves as well, a trend that has won wide praise.

Yet the negative connotation remains—despite the fact that evaluation can be the key to a strong board-superintendent relationship and a vehicle for the interaction that breeds understanding and trust. A succinct description of its merits came from George Redfern, a former associate executive director of AASA and a respected authority on the subject:

"Evaluation plays many roles. It is motivational. It is an aid in planning. It is developmental. It aids in communication. And ultimately, effective evaluation helps assure a good education for students in our nation's schools."

Consultant Kenneth Underwood added that evaluation—done well—also "forces both boards and superintendents to look at what they are doing"—to think carefully and deeply about their mission and their actions in carrying

out that mission. The evaluation process has this impact because its components—determining needs, setting goals, measuring progress, and reviewing and possibly reformulating objectives for improvement—are at the heart of sound educational planning. Thus, it is so much more than performance evaluation.

Why is evaluation important?

Redfern and many others, including superintendents and board members, believe that evaluation is essential to effective school management. So changing its name to get rid of its negative past and focus on its tremendous potential might not be a bad idea, if it could be done.

Why is evaluation so important? Its importance lies in its purposes, cited by Redfern in *Evaluating the Superintendent:*

- Describes clearly the duties and responsibilities of the superintendent.
- Clarifies the board's expectations of his/her performance.
- Enables the superintendent to know how he/she stands with the board.
- Identifies both areas of strength and weakness in the superintendent's performance.
- Improves communication between the board and superintendent.
- Provides ways by which needs for improvement can be met.
- Fosters a high trust level between the superintendent and board.
- Enables the board to hold the superintendent accountable for carrying out its policies and responding to its priorities.

Everybody wins

Redfern and others emphasize that a good evaluation is beneficial to *both* the board and superintendent. "A lack of clear objectives and feedback on how school board members feel about progress being made toward meeting those objectives can result in hidden agendas or breakdowns in communication between school boards and administrators," he wrote. "The absence of an effective system of evaluation can result in a feeling of insecurity for chief school executives."

Superintendents, he continued, "need the policy direction of their school boards, but they also need their reinforcement for a job well done. Sincere, earned recognition from school boards can be a great help to school administrators."

His views were echoed by Richard Dittloff, former president of the Ashwaubenon school board in Wisconsin, who said evaluation "not only helps superintendents improve—and grow—as they carry out their responsibilities, it also can help [the] board understand its own goals for the entire school system." As he wrote in an *American School Board Journal* article, "In short, board evaluation of the superintendent makes life easier for everyone."

Former superintendent and consultant Kenneth Peters said evaluation is "extremely important today because there are so many issues and factors that can develop misunderstanding between boards and superintendents." Redfern agreed, saying that "the potential for schisms in superintendent-board relationships appears to be on the increase."

Carolyn L. Braddom, former president of the Forest Hills school board in Ohio, said that "regular, detailed evaluation (and the feedback it entails) is crucial if a superintendent is to continue functioning well in the job." In her *Journal* article, she also said that "by doing regular evaluations, [the] board can improve its relationship with the superintendent, can clarify its outlook on the superintendent's role and duties and develop a cohesive outline of the superintendent's future goals in priority order."

In his book, *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture*, Cyril O. Houle said good evaluations can help a board realize "that it must make changes in itself" and that "the executive's problems may not be unique to him but ones that would be experienced by anybody in his place."

Insurance for superintendent

Evaluation often is viewed primarily as a means for the board to hold the superintendent accountable for the performance of the school system, but many see advantages for the chief executive too. Stanley L. Bippus, former superintendent of the Tillamook public schools in Oregon, said a sound evaluation "is the best insurance policy you can provide the superintendent." This is because the process entails a written record of what the board asked of the superintendent and what was delivered, he said.

"Indeed, a superintendent who doesn't demand to be evaluated by the board is asking for disaster, and the board that fails to evaluate the superintendent is doing a disservice to the school system and community as well as to the superintendent," he wrote in a *Journal* article.

Peters said evaluation provides "protection" for boards and superintendents in case of conflicts. "Even if tension,

pressures and concerns are being discussed between them, it is better to get the specifics on the record [in a formal evaluation] as to where the board feels the superintendent has been delinquent."

An Educational Research Service report, "Evaluation of Superintendents and School Boards," said the evaluation process is important for documenting board decisions, both positive and negative, about the superintendent. "If, for example, a board believes it has become necessary not to extend its superintendent's contract, the records of past evaluations will provide documentation to substantiate the board's decision," the report said. "Conversely, periodic documentation of sustained satisfactory or exemplary performance can provide an effective defense against attacks on the superintendent by hostile members of the community."

Resolves conflicts

Evaluation also is seen as a valuable device for resolving conflict. Huge said that "if the board and superintendent sit down frequently for an evaluation, it can be very, very healthy and resolve and prevent a lot of conflicts."

Becoming a Better Board Member, published by NSBA, says evaluations "may not solve all of a board's conflicts with its superintendent, but many board members say it helps keep conflicts in perspective. It also provides a regular, and anticipated, outlet for resolving those conflicts."

As J. G. Hayden, superintendent of the Independent School District No. 393 in Le Sueur, Minnesota, noted in *The School Administrator* magazine, it is "frequently possible to raise concerns in these reviews rather than letting them grow into major issues."

Heller said he is convinced that if more boards and superintendents followed regular evaluation procedures, "there would be fewer firings of superintendents." Consultant William Mahoney agreed: "If evaluations are done well, they can do a lot to alleviate situations that lead to firings. Almost every time I've talked to a superintendent who has been dismissed, he has said, 'I didn't know anything about this beforehand.' I'd bet he probably never had a thorough evaluation."

Strengthens partnerships

Advocates of evaluation also have emphasized how it provides frequent feedback on performance, which is essential to an orderly flow of management information. Superintendent Robert R. Dillon of the Abbott Union Free School District in Irvington, New York, and Professor Joseph W. Halliwell of St. John's University, wrote in *NY School Boards*," a journal of the New York State School Boards Association, that evaluation of superintendents "serves as a model for the district's position on accountability for other administrators and teachers."

Redfern says evaluation, if carried out cooperatively, serves the best interests of both the board and superintendent by building a "strong bond of mutual interest in superintendent-board relations." It builds cohesiveness between the board and superintendent through what Redfern refers to as "non-exploitation," an important element of cohesiveness.

"Neither the superintendent nor the board should seek to exploit the other," he said. "They must function as 'partners' in achieving the goals and purposes of the school system." Evaluation is the means for forming partnerships because "opportunities for collaboration are multiplied when evaluation processes are shared," Redfern said. "Teamwork supplants the temptation to operate in such a manner that one triumphs at the expense of the other."

In this way, he said, "the limits of responsibility and authority are well defined and shared. Behavior is rational and reasonably free of inordinate competitiveness. Openness is encouraged. In this framework, differences of opinion can be dealt with in a forthright manner. In short, the dividends of cooperative evaluation are well worth the effort."

Improves communications

What this comes down to is better communication, which may be the most important ingredient of excellent board-superintendent relationships. Boards and superintendents communicate in a variety of ways, at many levels, and to varying degrees. But sometimes it is hit or miss.

When problems arise, "some school boards put off talking about problems they have with the superintendent's on-the-job action," Bippus said. "Then, under the heightened pressure of a crisis, board members and the superintendent grow defensive or even hostile. Communications erode, and finally the superintendent moves on or is asked to resign."

Bippus said school districts can avoid such breakdowns in board-superintendent relationships by establishing a good process of evaluation, which, if conducted according to schedule, makes sure that communication on vital issues takes place. "A formal evaluation process, followed regularly, keeps vital communication lines open" and strengthens relations between boards and superintendents, the ERS report added.

How it works

Redfern identified three basic ways that the evaluation process improves communications:

• **Pre-evaluation planning.** This involves discussions of plans, programs, and projects the superintendent might undertake during the coming year, all of which leads to mutual agreement, understanding, and unity about the direction, both short and long-term, of the district.

• **Periodic checkup conferences**. These are held to gauge the extent to which plans are producing expected results and to determine if changes in plans are needed. The number of checkups varies, with one mid-point conference considered the minimum. Some plans contain quarterly discussions.

• **Final review conference.** Here the results of the planning can be assessed and future plans discussed.

Redfern stressed that this schedule assures ongoing communications about where the district is heading, reducing the chances of surprises, especially at the crucial year-end review.

Helps set priorities

The process also provides boards with opportunities to identify possible priorities for the superintendents and the

AASA-NSBA Position on Evaluation

Though individual school board members have many opportunities to observe and evaluate a superintendent's performance, it is clear that such informal evaluations cannot provide the board with a complete picture of the superintendent's effectiveness in carrying out a very complex job. Regular, formal evaluations offer boards the best means of assessing their chief administrator's total performance. Conducted properly, they benefit the instructional program of the school district by:

• Enhancing the chief administrator's effectiveness.

• Assuring the board that its policies are being carried out.

• Clarifying for the superintendent and individual board members the responsibilities the board relies on the superintendent to fulfill.

• Strengthening the working relationship between the board and superintendent.

To gain these benefits, boards must commit themselves to the belief that all individuals can improve if given the opportunity to do so. This commitment should take the form of a written policy that:

• Makes explicit the board's belief that evaluations should be constructive experiences to enhance performance.

• Assures the superintendent that he/she will know the standards against which he/she will be evaluated, and will be involved in their development.

• Asks, before the board as a whole evaluates the superintendent, that individual board members and the superintendent measure the chief administrator's performance against the agreed-upon standards.

• Schedules the board as a whole to review all evaluations of the superintendent's performance at regular intervals—at least once a year before discussing renewal of the superintendent's contract, and preferably half-way through the school year as well, so the superintendent can receive guidance in areas where need is seen for improvement.

• Specifies that the board's evaluation will occur at a scheduled time and place, with no other items on the agenda, at a study or executive session with all board members and the superintendent present.

• Requires the board's evaluation to include discussions of both strengths and weaknesses, but stipulates that each judgment be supported by as much rational and objective evidence as possible.

• States that evaluation results will be used by the board and superintendent as they cooperatively set job targets by which the superintendent's performance will be measured in the ensuing year; results also may be used as the basis for planning a program of professional development.

The policy also may invite the superintendent to request an evaluation of the board's own performance if the executive believes such a session would help clarify his or her role.

—*Evaluating the Superintendent, AASA-NSBA joint publication, 1980.*

districts, he said. In fact, by engaging in the process, it virtually obligates boards to confront the task of setting priorities. At the same time, it provides superintendents with opportunities to recommend priorities, which are vital when time, talent, and other resources are limited. Thus, priority-setting can be built into the evaluation process.

In this way, evaluation fosters accountability by producing tangible evidence of whether the policies and programs of the school district have been carried out successfully and in conformance with the board's expectations, Redfern said. It holds boards accountable for establishing the policies and priorities for programs and the superintendents accountable for performance. Redfern warned, however, that the accountability mechanism is not likely to work well unless specific objectives with measurable results are used instead of relying on broad generalizations drawn from subjective judgments.

The ERS report underscored what it cited as the fundamental rationale for engaging in evaluations. "Improving educational performance is the basic reason for a school board to systematically evaluate the superintendent," it said. "Because of the superintendent's unique position as chief executive officer, he or she affects the school district's overall performance." In the most elementary terms, the superintendent's performance has a direct impact on teacher performance, which in turn affects student achievement.

"Systematic evaluations can help superintendents maintain an awareness of these interconnections and prevent them from becoming detached from the education for which they are responsible," it added.

Focuses board efforts

If evaluation helps to focus superintendents, it also directs the attention of boards. "When a school board evaluates its superintendent, it also creates opportunities to improve its own effectiveness," the report said. "Evaluating the superintendent compels the board to understand the superintendent's management role and responsibilities, thus more clearly defining its own policy making role." By helping the superintendent set goals and standards for his or her endeavors, the process also helps the board set district goals and objectives and, in turn, plan to better meet the needs of students.

Furthermore, evaluation is a valuable way of keeping the district "on track." Goals, objectives and priorities have a way of shifting, sometimes in subtle ways. And when there is a shift in emphasis in the superintendent's management responsibilities or the board's priorities, evaluation is an ideal method for looking hard and thinking clearly about these changes. Evaluation helps boards and superintendents identify them and, if necessary, ratify them, the report said. It is easy to see how a drift in a school district's course can generate misunderstandings and friction between the board and superintendent, if there is no evaluation process.

Evaluation on the rise

One of the most encouraging signs of improvement in educational practice is the wider use of evaluation by school boards and superintendents today. In response to separate surveys for this Critical Issues Report, 87 percent of the board presidents and 88 percent of the superintendents from different districts said the chief executives of their schools are evaluated regularly by the boards.

The vast majority of both groups said evaluations most often are used to make improvements in the educational programs and to enhance the working relationships between boards and superintendents. A smaller but still significantly large number said it is used to resolve conflicts between boards and superintendents.

Board presidents said the evaluation process is used in a variety of ways to improve board-superintendent relationships: by establishing district goals jointly, achieving and sustaining good communications, agreeing on mutual expectations, checking performance progress, and helping superintendents to improve, in that order.

Superintendents listed these ways: improving communications, setting goals jointly, checking progress, determining ways to improve programs, clarifying roles, focusing on constructive criticisms, and keeping written records, in that order.

Comments from the field

Board presidents saw many benefits to evaluation in building better board-superintendent relationships. Here are some examples:

"Our evaluation resulted in two changes. First, our superintendent improved communication with the board. Second, he has been freer to give us his vision of where the district is headed and where he wants it to go," said John L. Lemega of West Hartford, Connecticut.

"Our evaluation is brutally frank. Few stones are left unturned. The superintendent has no doubts where we are coming from after the evaluation," said Mary M. Roe of Pinckneyville, Illinois.

"The evaluation provides a setting to promote open communications. In the past, there have been misunderstandings resulting from different interpretations of the same information. With everyone coming from the same

direction, working relationships are much improved," said Robert J. Holland, Anamosa, Iowa.

Many superintendents had similar comments. "Evaluation helps board and superintendent to identify and focus on specific district objectives. It helps to define and understand respective roles and relationships," said James E. Morrell, Muhlenberg School District, Laureldale, Pennsylvania.

"It could resolve any conflicts over job performance which might 'spring up.' Annual evaluations give the superintendent the opportunity to improve any weak areas as perceived by the board," said Lester D. Plotner, Lincoln, Illinois.

And one disagreed. "Frank communications and keeping the air clear as to any concerns is more important than a complicated evaluation instrument that will not always be completed honestly by members of a board of education," said a superintendent who asked that his name not be used.

Survey findings

AASA's 1992 *Study of the American School Superintendency* found that nearly 97 percent of the surveyed superintendents said they are evaluated. About 80 percent said the evaluation is done annually, 10 percent semiannually and about 10 percent at other times. Other details of the study included the following:

- About 43 percent of the evaluations are formal, 15 percent informal and 38 percent a combination of formal and informal.
- About 87 percent of the superintendents said they have formal job descriptions; 57 percent of those said they are evaluated against those job criteria and 43 percent said they are not.
- The main reasons that superintendents say boards evaluate them are for accountability, to establish performance goals, assess performance, to identify areas needing improvement, and to comply with board policy, in that order.
- Superintendents say these are the main factors that boards look at in their evaluations: general effectiveness, board-superintendent relationships, management functions, budget development and implementation, and educational leadership and knowledge, in that order.

The ERS report came up with similar findings: 80 percent of surveyed superintendents said they were evaluated annually, 7 percent said more often than once a year, 6 percent said they were evaluated infrequently and irregularly, 1 percent said every two years, 1 percent said every three years and 5 percent said never.

The findings from these surveys show that evaluation of superintendents is slightly more prevalent than 10 years ago and the evaluations are more formal by a significant margin. But the fact that 57 percent of the superintendents with job descriptions said they are not being evaluated against those criteria "reinforces the notion that the quality of the interpersonal relationships between the superintendent and board members is really what counts," the AASA study said.

"It suggests the possibility that in many districts, job descriptions are taken from books or manuals and used without much thought as to whether the criteria match what the board expects the superintendent to do," the study added.

Informality creates problems

This point also suggests that while formal evaluations have increased, too many of them still may be informal in character. This may mean that the objective qualities of sound evaluations are missing in many instances.

In reality, Houle said, evaluation of the superintendent by the board and the community starts the minute the chief executive is hired.

"A climate of opinion starts to grow among the trustees about the strengths and weaknesses of the person they have chosen as their chief collaborator," he said. These judgments flow from the board's observations at meetings and at informal gatherings as well as from comments from community people, Houle said. "But these informal judgments and ameliorations are not enough. At least once a year, the executive has a right to have a coherent view of the board's opinion of his work."

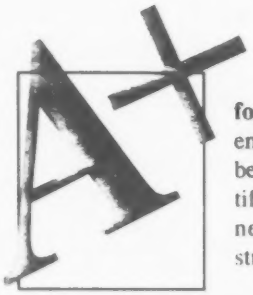
Redfern said informal evaluation as a substitute for formal evaluation remains a problem. "The practice of informal, unwritten evaluations of the superintendent's performance prevailed for a long time," he said. "As long as things went well, there seemed little need to let the superintendent know how he was doing. Only when operations failed did it seem necessary to total up the assets and liabilities of the superintendent. The trouble with that practice was that it often occurred too late to correct the initial difficulty."

NSBA says that "with increasing frequency, school boards are discovering that relying solely on ad hoc evaluations of the superintendent is inadequate." But as the surveys and observations show, it still happens. Consultant Ira Krinsky said he urges boards and superintendents to establish annual objectives that are specific and definable, but "most don't."

A matter of quality

Reliance on informal, subjective evaluations is just one

What Good Evaluation Can Do for Schools



- **Promotes improved performance.** Evaluation should enable the superintendent to become more effective by identifying strengths and weaknesses and building on strengths.
- **Facilitates planning.** Systematic planning, including establishment of objectives, implementation, and measurement of results, is an integral part of evaluation, and is the route to desired improvement in performance.
- **Generates collaboration.** Planning through partnership is a major feature of effective evaluation.
- Uses specific objectives. Good planning as part of the evaluation process entails establishment of specific objectives that reflect mutual agreements between boards and superintendents and define directions for school districts.
- **Emphasizes results.** The bottom line in evaluation is measurable results to determine the superintendent's effectiveness, rather than noble effort and good intentions.
- **Increases motivation.** Evaluation helps accomplish worthwhile objectives, which provides a sense of satisfaction and makes the process a fulfilling experience for both board and superintendent.

—*Evaluating the Superintendent, AASA-NSBA joint publication, 1980.*

problem still plaguing evaluations by school districts. Quality is another.

Braddom says evaluation of the superintendent still "is one of the most important—but least understood—functions of the school board." Even though boards are conducting evaluations more regularly, the quality of those evaluations still needs strengthening, she and others say. "More boards are making an attempt, but some boards don't do it and some don't do it well," consultant Karl Plath said.

Brian O'Connell, president of the Independent Sector, an umbrella group of more than 800 nonprofit organizations, said he has found that "most organizations overlook the need for an annual review, and in fact no evaluation is done until the point of brinkmanship is reached."

"Many boards don't pay attention to the evaluation of their superintendents," Heller said. "They put it off and think they are doing the superintendents a favor. But it's a disservice. Then conflict develops and both sides can't understand why they didn't see it coming. The problem is many boards don't feel comfortable with the process."

Heller said some superintendents "don't push it either, thinking if the board doesn't do it 'I'm home free.'" Professor James Guthrie of the University of California at Berkeley said some superintendents like their evaluations to be "mushy," but "the stronger the superintendents are, the more they want clear goals and good evaluations."

A touchy subject

The reason boards put if off, NSBA says, is that "the evaluation of a superintendent's performance is a very touchy subject. Some boards perceive evaluation as an invitation to spoiling their relationships with their chief executive with negative or critical review, so they choose to ignore evaluation." Mahoney said he has found that "many boards are surprised when superintendents want to be evaluated."

Plath said boards and superintendents often "talk about it during the employment process and agree that it will be developed together and done regularly. But then it seems to break down over a period of time if the board and superintendent are in [office] for a number of years. They tend to let it go. Then, sometimes they will do it when a problem arises."

There is a potential pitfall here, Plath warned. "A new member may get elected to the board and have his own agenda. Then he finds out the board has not been conducting evaluations, something that is considered critical. This can be a big strike against the board and superintendent."

Underwood said boards and superintendents sometimes don't get around to evaluation because their relationship is

new and, as NSBA pointed out, they don't want to risk spoiling a good thing. "Too many times boards and superintendents are so enamored with the new situation, and they won't spend the time [for evaluations] when things are going well."

Peters said that "if the superintendent is getting along fine, I am surprised to see good evaluations done. Boards hate to do it. They [boards and superintendents] frequently have difficult times conducting formal evaluations because they feel awkward doing it. They just don't want to get involved." Peters said often when he was called in to help boards engage in evaluations, "I would develop the instruments and inform members about the time to meet, and then they would say to me, 'I think he [the superintendent] has been doing a good job. Let's make this short.' They didn't want to be bothered, which is human nature."

Going through the motions

Krinsky said one common obstacle to evaluation is that "boards and superintendents seem to get so caught up in maintenance issues that they don't look at where they are going."

Dillon and Halliwell conducted a survey of New York school boards and found that "in all too many school districts, formal superintendent evaluation has been pretty much pro forma." Their findings indicated boards and superintendents "are going through the motions in a perfunctory manner and the results of the evaluations do not seem to be taken too seriously."

Their survey discovered, for example, that while the state requires school boards to evaluate superintendents annually, more than 25 percent of boards reported they had no written policy pertaining to evaluations. About 50 percent of the superintendents and 33 percent of the boards said the superintendent's performance was not included in the mutual objectives established for the district.

Inservice training lacking

The report said both groups agreed overwhelmingly that the boards had not received inservice training on evaluation and outside consultants were not used to develop the evaluation process. In addition, about 66 percent of the superintendents and 40 percent of the boards said student achievement was not used as a factor in the evaluations. Only about 50 percent of both groups "perceived superintendent evaluation as receiving a high priority from school boards."

Dillon and Halliwell concluded that if evaluation is to have a positive impact on schools and the performance of superintendents, "a great deal more attention should be devoted to ensuring that school board members receive the necessary inservice training to carry out the task and to educating both parties about its value."

Keeping evaluation positive

Much of the aversion to evaluation remains in the negative approach that some boards use. In Dittloff's article, James Henderson, superintendent in Ashwaubenon, Wisconsin, noted that "positive reinforcement from board members is a powerful tool, and more board members should use it."

The way to combat the negative side of evaluation is to focus on the constructive nature of the enterprise by making a conscious attempt to take a positive approach. Heller and Frank F. Calzi, superintendent of the Edgemont Union Free School District in Scarsdsale, New York, pointed out in an *American School Board Journal* article that "the specifics of [the] evaluation aren't as important as the philosophy behind it. Better communications and a more effective superintendent should be the hallmarks of that philosophy."

The methods are important factors in making evaluation a motivating experience, Redfern said, and these will be discussed later in the chapter. "Even more significant, however, is the *way* the evaluation process is carried out."

How it is performed

"At stake here are fidelity in carrying out each step or phase of evaluation, the attitudes of both parties toward evaluation, the quality of interpersonal relationships between superintendent and board and the use of results. In short, *what is done* in evaluation is important, but *how it is performed* is crucial if it is to be motivating for the superintendent and satisfying for the board."

Houle said that "it is crucial in any such venture to keep processes and structures sufficiently under control that they are always seen as helpful ways of reaching the goal of institutional improvement sought by both board and executive; they should not threaten the latter in what is almost always a tense situation for him." The underlying principle, he said, should be that the evaluation is "carried out in a collaborative and constructive fashion."

Bippus concurs, noting that after a board has finished evaluating the superintendent, "how you present [the] evaluation . . . is critical." The board may have a well-documented evaluation in its hands, but if the board

"presents it in a negative manner, [it] can turn [the] evaluation into a confrontation." Dittloff warned that a board "can jeopardize a superintendent's career and seriously disrupt a school system by allowing the evaluation process to become a political tug-of-war.

Avoiding confrontation

Braddom said that "positive support for the superintendent is essential during and after the evaluation. In fact, the tone of the board's comments can determine whether the superintendent accepts the board's ideas or is too angry or too threatened to adopt them."

Here is Bippus's advice for avoiding confrontation:

"Give the superintendent a chance to present his side, too. Don't say, 'We think your financial reports are inadequate, and we want more facts and figures.' Instead, ask him what he thinks about the financial reports. Chances are the superintendent knows his weaknesses and will admit them to the board, as well as offer ideas on how he might improve. It's better, in the end, to let your superintendent tell you he's not happy with his performance than for you to tell him he's doing a lousy job."

What happens when the board and superintendent don't see eye to eye in an area where the board feels improvement is needed? "Try voicing the board's concern in the form of a question: 'Is it possible to obtain more background information for our board agenda packets?' 'How can we get more community involvement in our schools?' This approach puts no one on the defensive; it backs no one into a corner. The discussion that follows between your board and superintendent usually will result in a mutually acceptable plan of remediation."

"Both parties should approach this review in a systematic manner with the goal of being helpful rather than as a way of telling each other what they are doing wrong," Hayden said.

NSBA suggests an evaluation report should "keep the tone positive. A little flattery goes a long way. Tell your superintendent what he's doing correctly. Use the 'catch more flies with honey than vinegar' approach to point out negatives. Even if your board eventually uses its evaluation as a basis for firing the superintendent, it should not approach the process as part of an adverse action."

The conclusion of the evaluation is important, too. "It is a good practice to end each evaluation on a positive note," the ERS report said. "This may be difficult if a number of performance deficiencies have been identified. Nevertheless, every effort should be made to finish the experience by emphasizing what the superintendent has done well." It holds the best chance of motivating the superintendent to undertake improvements.

Evaluation in contracts

There is widespread agreement that evaluation has taken on such importance that it should be spelled out in all employment contracts between school boards and superintendents. AASA and NSBA both concur on that.

"At the time a superintendent is employed, it is important to discuss the method that will be used to assess performance," Redfern said. "In fact, a provision should be included in the contract clarifying how evaluations will be conducted. Today, more and more superintendents and boards are insisting on clarification of evaluation procedures at employment time." In this way, greater assurance is provided that evaluation will be carried out in a systematic way, he said.

Indicators of a Good Evaluation

- The evaluation is conducted in a positive climate.
- The board is familiar with the superintendent's job.
- The board communicates its expectations to the superintendent early in the process.
- The board gives the superintendent frequent and timely feedback.
- The board's judgments are supported with specific examples.
- The evaluation focuses on performance results, not personalities.
- The superintendent is afforded an opportunity to respond to the evaluation.
- The evaluation is limited to those matters which are observable to the board.
- The evaluation is limited to those matters over which the superintendent has authority.
- The board supports the superintendent in the achievement of educational goals.

—*Evaluating Effectiveness: Appraising Superintendent and Board Performance, Texas Association of School Boards.*

Heller said superintendents "should insist on the evaluation process being in the contract and should hold boards to that." Guthrie said it is "unfair to hire someone to a multiyear contract and not specify what he is expected to accomplish. That can be addressed by including a provision for evaluation [in the contract]."

Plath said that "at least if it is built into the contract and the board's working agenda, it means the board and superintendent are more likely to sit down and communicate" about evaluation.

The ERS report said the evaluation procedure should be formalized jointly by the board and superintendent. "Joint preparation can help to make evaluation procedures and expectations clear in the minds of everyone involved," it said. Joint preparation includes "weighing the relative importance of each criterion so that the overall evaluation is in proper perspective and the final result accurately reflects overall performance," the report said.

And besides jointly formulating evaluation procedures, boards and superintendents should provide ample time for the activity and schedule evaluation meetings with nothing else on the agendas. "Successful evaluations do not just happen," the ERS report said. "They are the result of carefully planned and executed procedures for measuring performance against well-defined goals."

Methods of evaluation

There are a number of evaluation methods, and their relative value lies more in the way they are used—and the results they produce—than in their particular components. Here are some basic methods listed by Redfern and the ERS report:

- **Checklists and rating scales.** Board members rate various aspects of a superintendent's performance according to a list of standards or criteria on a numerical scale. About 80 percent of the superintendents surveyed by ERS said they are evaluated by this method.
- **Written statements.** Board members put their assessments of the superintendent's performance in narrative form. About 61 percent of the superintendents said some form of written assessment was included in their evaluations.
- **Forced choice**. Board members choose from among a series of statements that they feel best or least describes a performance in various areas.
- **Management by objectives.** Evaluation is a component of this management system, in which decision makers establish goals or job targets, how they intend to reach them, when they will be accomplished and so forth. In this system, the superintendent is evaluated on the basis of results in achieving the objectives.

Detailed discussions of these various methods can be found in AASA's *Evaluating the Superintendent*, the ERS report, NSBA's *Becoming a Better Board Member* and other publications. The focus here will be on promoting good evaluation outcomes.

For instance, the ERS report says, the superintendent should be held accountable only for those things for which he or she has operational responsibility. This requires a clear and mutual understanding of the working relationship between the board and superintendent.

Ongoing and prompt

In addition, evaluation should be an ongoing process, keeping the superintendent formally and systematically apprised of his or her performance. Dittloff said it is important that the board does not conduct an evaluation once a year and forget about it. "Evaluation, to be effective, must be continuous," he said. In his district, the board meets with the superintendent three times a year, in addition to the annual evaluation session.

Henderson, the superintendent in Dittloff's district, said evaluations also should be prompt. "If the board believes the superintendent is veering off course, this should be discussed as soon as possible—not months after programs have been started," he said. "Superintendents deserve the chance to correct problems as soon as they are spotted."

Before deciding on the method of evaluation, NSBA said, the board should make clear what precisely is to be appraised. To decide, boards should ask themselves these questions:

- What do we expect the superintendent to accomplish?
- Have our goals, policies, direction, and budget allocations made this possible?
- Does our superintendent's job description cover our expectations?
- What has the superintendent been doing that's right?
- In what areas does the superintendent need to improve?

Criteria for evaluation

Boards also must decide on the criteria for evaluating the superintendent's performance. Of course, each board must select its own set of criteria, depending on its priorities, local conditions, and what it believes are the important

attributes of an effective chief executive. ERS compiled the following criteria that are commonly used in evaluations:

- Relations with school board
- Relations with professional staff
- Public and community relations
- Student performance and relations
- Business/fiscal management
- Professional and personal characteristics
- Achievement of district goals
- Curriculum and instructional management
- Management, implementation of board policies.

Evaluation of boards

The accountability movement in public education has been a major impetus toward evaluation of superintendents on a formal, systematic and regular basis. But in recent years, it also has begun to focus on the need for evaluations of school boards as well. Some contend board evaluations are an important part of a modern management system and contribute significantly to board effectiveness.

That also contributes to better board-superintendent relationships because qualities of an outstanding board feed into support for and success of the superintendent. This, as Thomas Shannon, NSBA executive director, has pointed out, includes understanding the leadership roles for boards and chief executives.

The ERS report said the establishment of criteria to judge performance, which is required in evaluation, "distinguishes board responsibilities from those of the superintendent, thus making their important relationship more constructive."

The rationale against school board evaluations has been that board members are accountable either to voters or appointing authorities. "It's common to hear a board member say, 'I get evaluated at the polls.'" NSBA's guide, *Becoming a Better Board Member*, noted, "Some appointed board members view reappointment as an affirmation that they are doing a good job." Therefore, they feel that no other evaluations of their performances are necessary because they are different from employees, including superintendents.

But that difference should not excuse boards from being evaluated as corporate bodies, others have argued. Boards should be evaluated for the same reason that employees are evaluated—to improve their performances, they say. The ERS report said self-evaluation by a board "demonstrates its willingness to meet the same accountability tests that it demands of others." For the most part, advocates of board evaluations have called for boards to evaluate themselves the way they evaluate superintendents—formally, systematically, and regularly.

The ERS report on evaluation contains a strong argument by Ruth H. Paige, former president and executive secretary of the New Jersey School Boards Association, in favor of board self-evaluations:

"Only through careful, honest, open appraisal can a board hope to improve its performance and that of its superintendent. The board must recognize that the school system can be no better than the board. The best superintendent can go no further than the limitations the board will allow. Board members must work to remove their limitations and strengthen their effectiveness if schools are to

Common Evaluation Mistakes Made by Boards

- Undertaking evaluation without a clear understanding of what the superintendent is—or should be—doing.
- Evaluating in a vacuum.
- Thinking of evaluation only in terms of correcting deficiencies.
- Overlooking half the purpose of evaluation: acknowledging and rewarding good work.
- Measuring performance without carefully constructed standards.
- Posturing as psychologists.
- Not providing a forum in which the superintendent can respond to the board's evaluation.
- Not providing time for the superintendent to correct deficiencies before acting on the results of the evaluation.

—*The How and Why of Board and Superintendent Evaluation*, NSBA.

improve. Self-evaluations can be revealing and strengthening."

Elections are not enough

NSBA agrees. "The public can provide informal evaluation of a board, but it cannot provide the kind of evaluation a board *really* needs," *Becoming a Better Board Member* said. "Success at the polls is a political event, and does not always reflect a given board member's professional growth and performance." Community members who vote for board members rarely understand the roles and responsibilities of a board and measure a board's performance in that light, the publication said. Thus "the best people to do a constructive evaluation of the board are the board members themselves and the people they work with—the central office staff."

"School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership," a report by the Institute for Educational Leadership, said in a "political climate where demands for accountability are increasing, boards are beginning . . . to see the need for such a policy [of evaluation]."

The report said community involvement in the evaluation of boards can bring them closer together. "Board self-evaluations which include such constituencies could narrow the gap between a board's sense of its effectiveness and the public's perceptions," it said. For example, a self-evaluation at the end of a school year with participation by community members could include a review of priorities, planning for the next year, an assessment of school performance and identification of successes and needs. "This process could encourage the board, school system and community to develop a set of common expectations for the work and performance of the board," the report said.

In the minority

Nevertheless, the evidence indicates that only a minority of school boards currently evaluate themselves. An ERS survey conducted in 1989 found that about 25 percent conducted self-evaluations on a regular basis.

Only 41 percent of those board presidents surveyed for this Critical Issues Report indicated that their boards evaluate themselves. Superintendents who were surveyed said 33 percent of their boards conduct self-evaluations. But some of the board presidents said they were on the verge of starting, so the number may be growing. Judging by the attention the issue is receiving, self-evaluation by boards should continue to expand.

This report's survey asked whether self-evaluations take place and if the practice has contributed to a stronger board-superintendent relationship. Every one of the board presidents answered yes, and of their superintendents, 88 percent said it had helped. Where board do not evaluate themselves, 77 percent of the presidents said they thought it would help, as did 74 percent of the superintendents.

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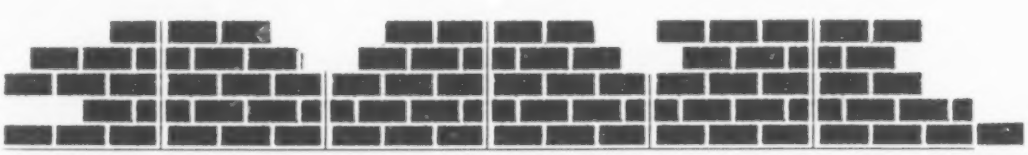


Board presidents' comments

Here is what some of the board presidents had to say about self-evaluation:

"There is a greater understanding of the various points of view on the board as we always have a very frank and open discussion among ourselves," said Gerri Long, Lombard Elementary District No. 44, Illinois.

"The board of education does a self-evaluation and is also evaluated by central office personnel. The evaluations are a way of formally providing feedback to each other to identify strengths and weaknesses," said Robert H. Connell, Horseheads Central School District, New York.

"Board members individually rate the board's performance in all areas of board responsibility and then meet to discuss it and reach consensus," said Nancy Beals, Hamden Public Schools, Connecticut.

"It defines roles better," said Robert Weppner, Pocatello School District No. 25, Idaho.

"With four new members, we have to learn to understand each other [and self-evaluation is expected to help]," said J. Spencer Helmers, Owen J. Roberts School District, Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

In an interview for this Report, Mary Jason, a board member in East Jordan, Michigan, and former president of the Michigan Association of School Boards, enthusiastically endorsed self-evaluations. "It has helped us a great deal," she said. "At our work sessions, we discuss specific topics to see where the other guy is coming from, what shaped his thinking. The superintendent and staff can give their perspective. It opens a lot of minds and builds rapport and a good working relationship with everyone."

The board-superintendent relationship is strengthened when the board looks at its role compared to the superintendent's role.

Superintendents' comments

Superintendents agree about the value of board self-evaluation.

The "board-superintendent relationship is strengthened when the board looks at its role compared to the superintendent's role," said Homer B. Smith, Medina County School District, Ohio.

"It has built trust and communications," said William F. Tracy, Branch Intermediate School District, Coldwater, Michigan.

"As with superintendent evaluation, board self-assessment helps all to take a long, hard look at everyone's functioning and interaction," said Bert Nelson, Hewlett-Woodmere Public Schools, New York.

"The board self-evaluation, done honestly, takes some of the pressure off the superintendent. They establish their own ground rules for ethical behavior," said Jerome J. Ochs, Geneseo Central Schools, New York.

"Several of them [board members] treat their positions as a political base from which they 'get things done' for friends or special interest groups. I don't feel they think there is a need to change nor do I think they would want to change," said a superintendent who, for obvious reasons, asked to remain anonymous.

Why don't they do it?

Consultants who have advised boards also are convinced that self-evaluation is helpful. "It is good for a board to conduct a self-appraisal," consultant Charles Raab said, "but not enough of them do because it can be threatening."

Huge said the emphasis on board evaluation is very recent and he still finds few that do it. "Boards that don't conduct self-evaluations are missing an opportunity to enhance their productivity, which influences the education of kids, and to increase their enjoyment as board members," he said. Huge said that since self-examination is a "sensitive" undertaking, many boards probably won't engage in evaluation on their own. "It is the superintendent's role to help boards understand what it can do for them and to facilitate the process," he said. "It probably won't occur without the superintendent initiating it."

And that might not be as easy as it sounds. Some boards are not particularly receptive to suggestions from superintendents about how they conduct their own business, particularly if it involves embracing a process that can be threatening, superintendents say. For that reason, Huge suggests raising the issue during the "honeymoon" period soon after the superintendent is hired, when it should be easier to discuss unpleasant subjects.

Sometimes an outsider can help get a board started in self-evaluation, consultant Vic Cottrell said. The goal of the adviser should be "to work himself out of a job" as soon as possible by teaching the board how to conduct the evaluations on their own, he added.

"Evaluating Effectiveness: Appraising Superintendent and Board Performance," a report by William Nemir for

the Texas Association of School Boards, recommended these basic steps to self-evaluation:

- Decide on the goals of the self-appraisal.
- Decide what aspects of board operations to evaluate.
- Select and adapt an evaluation instrument.
- Set a calendar for completing the process.
- Hold a meeting of the board to discuss the appraisal findings.

Self-evaluation criteria

Boards, of course, must adopt their own criteria or standards for judging their performance. The ERS report contains a list of recommended criteria for boards to compare themselves with.

Among other criteria, an effective board:

- Conducts meetings as scheduled, following the agenda, and at a time and place convenient to the community.
- Marshals sufficient resources to ensure the best possible educational system, keeps abreast of student scholastic progress, and periodically reviews the curriculum.
- Develops comprehensive personnel and educational policies and refrains from interfering with the superintendent and others charged with administering those policies.
- Establishes both long-range and short-range goals relating to academic progress, faculty and staff procurement, and physical plant needs.
- Maintains a cooperative and constructive relationship with the superintendent.
- Exercises responsibility for sound personnel policies, including adequate staff compensation plans, an effective professional growth and development evaluation system, and fair personnel employment and dismissal policies.
- Maintains a good relationship with the public—including the media—by encouraging the public's attendance at board meetings and releasing all pertinent information through an authorized spokesperson.
- Ensures a thorough accounting of all revenues and expenditures and makes sure that all district property is adequately insured.
- Systematically provides for the orientation of new board members and for the continued development of incumbent members.
- Exercises responsibility for the security of schools and other district-owned facilities and ensures that energy conservation steps are taken where feasible.

Ingredients of Effective Board Self-Evaluations

- An evaluation should be constructive.
- Board members should develop the standards against which they will evaluate themselves.
- Evaluation should be based on goals the board sets for itself, not on goals it sets for the entire school system.
- The evaluation process should include board establishment of objectives and strategies for improving board performance.
- The board should not limit itself to those items that appear on the evaluation form.
- Formal evaluation should occur at least once a year and at a scheduled time and place.
- A composite picture of board strengths and weaknesses is best.
- The board should be evaluated as a whole, not as individuals.
- The board should have an orientation and in-service program for its members.

—*Becoming a Better Board Member*, NSBA.

Joint assessments

Another evaluation practice that is less widely used consists of joint evaluations or assessments, in which boards evaluate superintendents and at the same time superintendents and possibly other administrative staff members evaluate the boards.

In this system, the superintendent's evaluation of the board does not take the place of board self-evaluation, but is an additional component of the overall evaluation program. It is designed to add another dimension to the process of evaluating the board's effectiveness while furthering collaboration between the board and superintendent as partners in management of school districts.

The NSBA guide recommends that boards combine all three evaluations into one. "Superintendent evaluation should coincide with board self-evaluation," it said. "As your board evaluates the superintendent, have the superintendent evaluate the board."

Promotes joint responsibility

While Heller believes relatively few boards and superintendents engage in joint assessments, he feels the number is increasing. Professor Paul Thurston of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said the value of joint assessments resides in the idea of "joint responsibility for the success of the school district." He said board evaluation of the superintendent by itself may imply that only the superintendent is responsible and the board is above accountability.

Mahoney said joint assessments often provide another perspective to the self-examination process that might otherwise be missed. "When the superintendent and staff share their perceptions with the board, the members sometimes are amazed that they had never had an inkling of what they were." Heller said boards and superintendents sometimes feel more comfortable undergoing evaluation if they conduct a joint assessment at the same time. "It also gives the board a better sense of how difficult it is to go through an evaluation," he added.

"It is important for a board to have a sense of how they are perceived by the people who work most closely with them," Thomas Payzant, superintendent in San Diego, said. "If the goal is the most productivity of the staff and its high morale, then the board needs to know what things the staff sees as positive and as negative [in the board's behavior] and the barriers to getting things done to meet the board's goals."

Diplomacy required

Payzant said it "may be risky for some superintendents to become involved in assessing the board and to give the board candid feedback." That is why it is important to attempt to propose and reach agreement on joint assessments when the initial contract is being discussed, he said. It is a time—the honeymoon period—when the new superintendent may have the "leverage" to convince the board of the need for such an undertaking.

Whether at the time of initial employment or later, Payzant said, the superintendent should take pains not to broach the subject with the board "in a punitive sense." Instead, it should be framed as an endeavor "to build cohesiveness and a collaborative approach for the purpose of solving problems."

A key figure in this effort can be the board president, who could take the lead in proposing joint assessments to his or her colleagues on the board, Payzant said. The superintendent can privately suggest the idea to the board president, who might be in a better position to convince other board members of the appropriateness of having the superintendent and possibly other central office staff members assess the board's performance.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Secret of Success:

Laying the Foundation of Trust

The preceding chapters have made one thing clear: rocky relationships can easily develop between school boards and superintendents.

No one has yet come up with the perfect road map to guide school districts through the minefields that threaten ideal working relationships. It is an inherently ambiguous alliance fraught with potential pitfalls.

But the overriding fact is that nearly 90 percent of board presidents and superintendents surveyed for this Critical Issues Report rate their relationships as "excellent" or "good." Other data fully support this finding. It is stirring testimony that both groups can and do overcome built-in obstacles to produce effective leadership for America's schools.

Yet survey respondents recognize that even the best relationships can be fragile and require constant nurturing. In short, successful boards and superintendents work hard at being successful. "Wholesome, productive interrelationships require a concerted, ongoing effort on the part of the entire membership" and the superintendent, said the Institute for Educational Development in its report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership."

Board presidents and superintendents made the same point repeatedly in their comments accompanying the survey. "This is the key to all we do," Dave Peden, superintendent of the Fowlerville Community Schools in Michigan, said. "We work hard to maintain our relationship."

Larry Maciejewski, board president of the Gasconade County R-2 School District in Owensville, Missouri, agreed that "everyone and everything depends on good business and personal relationships." It is vitally important because it "sets the tone for the entire school district," said Orlo C. Almlie, superintendent of the Willmar Independent School District No. 347 in Minnesota.

How relationships begin

The two previous chapters showed how boards and superintendents begin building their relationships. They use the selection process as a two-way street to match expectations and goals to provide a solid foundation. Then they strengthen that foundation through sound and frequent evaluation to make sure their relationship is on track and their visions are on target.

What are the secrets of success? How do effective boards and superintendents make sure they achieve a meeting of the minds at the outset and throughout their relationship?

A consensus comes from the many superintendents, board members, consultants, and university professors interviewed and surveyed for this Critical Issues Report. The secret is the driving force behind good hiring procedures and

effective evaluation. It is boards and superintendents talking about what they want to accomplish, discussing how their plans are progressing, sharing ideas, keeping each other informed, and helping each other do their respective jobs.

The importance of communication

In short, it takes superb communication—not just pro forma communication but completely open communication. The starting place is that "you can't have any secrets," Kenneth Peters, former superintendent and consultant, said. "The superintendent has got to get all information to the board immediately, good or bad, with supporting data about what the information means." Robert J. Holland, board president of the Anamosa Community School District in Iowa, concurred, "Keeping an open line of communication is the key to a good superintendent/board relationship."

Perhaps the biggest mistake that superintendents and boards make is paying only lip service to this critical need for openness. If asked, boards and superintendents will say they communicate. But when asked how much and in what ways, communication between the two may turn out to be superficial.

Unfortunately, only one slip-up or lapse in communication can undermine, if not destroy, a relationship. It can be one piece of information withheld from the board by the superintendent or one board member speaking out of turn behind the superintendent's back. "Even the best of relationships will break down without proper communications," Homer B. Smith, superintendent of the Medina County School District in Ohio, said. "One bad experience can erase months or years of good relationships," said Donald M. Batista, superintendent of the Yonkers, New York, Public Schools.

Means to an end

How could one isolated incident do such damage? The answer underscores the immense value of communication. It is not an end in itself. Communication is valuable as a means to a much more important end, a much more important element of strong board-superintendent relationships that is the key to lasting, productive relationships.

Over and over, those interviewed for this report emphasized the importance of communication. "You can be an excellent superintendent but if you don't have personal communication skills, you're going to have a tough time," said superintendent Carol Grosse of the Alhambra Public Schools in Phoenix, Arizona. "If communication was better between boards and superintendents, there wouldn't be the turnover there is," said Michael Usdan, president of IEL.

Consultant Karl Plath said in conducting board searches for superintendents, board members and community leaders nearly always identify communication skills as the number one quality they want in a new superintendent. Kenneth Underwood, another consultant, agreed that almost every board he has worked for wanted better communication skills in the superintendent it was seeking.

More than talk

Professor Paul Thurston of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign made it clear what he means by communication. Simply talking without an important purpose is a waste of time. "There may be a tendency to want to

A Real Test of Trust

Raymond S. Kellis, superintendent of the Peoria Unified School District in Arizona, shared this anecdote on the questionnaire he filled out for the Critical Issues Report survey:

"It has been my practice to send a personal note to board members each year when my contract was renewed. One year I had handwritten notes to each but had not finished one of the notes to a very sensitive lady member. My unfinished note read: '. . . thank you for your trust reflected in my new contract. You are a . . .' and the sentence was unfinished.

"Being in a rush, I set the notes to one side and they somehow were mailed. Thankfully, the board member shared the note with me and said, 'Our whole family has worked at completing the sentence. Lots of words come to mind, but what did you *really* intend?' I nearly died.

"I thanked her for her kindness in returning the note. The next day I delivered a box of fresh peaches to her home with this note appended to it: 'You are a *peach!* and I will never forget your goodness in allowing me to confirm it.'

"We have been trusting friends ever since."

deemphasize substantive differences, and in that context, it is a disservice to view everything as a communication problem," he said. If a superintendent tries to control information and use it for his own purposes, he said, communication can be a tool for manipulation instead of honest sharing.

And that is the point raised earlier about communication serving as a means to an end. According to Michael Fullan, dean of education at the University of Toronto, communication "demonstrates the sincerity of one's intentions." And sincerity means *trust*, undoubtedly the tie that binds board and the superintendent.

The need for trust

There is a "compelling need for trust between policy makers and their chief executives in school district governance," declared Joseph Hentges, superintendent of the Woodstock, Illinois, School District, in a 1986 research report published in the *ERS Spectrum*. "Board members need to know that the superintendent is responsive to their needs and operates within an acceptable zone of tolerance. . . . The existence of a trust relationship creates an atmosphere in which board members are comfortable in approaching the chief executive to share expectations, concerns, and suggestions."

If a trust relationship exists, school boards are more willing to "permit wide discretionary powers for the superintendent" as long as they continue to share values and expectations for governing the districts, he said.

Trust was ranked first as the major strength of their relationships by superintendents and board presidents who were surveyed for this Critical Issues Report. Effective communication and good working cooperation were rated second.

Professor Robert Crowson of the University of Illinois at Chicago said superintendents "need to feel trusted and to trust others" because the superintendency is a position filled with insecurity. "Maybe the other side of it is distrust, which implies risk and vulnerability for superintendents," he said. So superintendents who fail to develop trust with boards are helping to create their own feelings of insecurity.

Superintendent James Buchanan of the Tempe Unified School District in Arizona, said the situation also can be the other way around. "Board members are so vulnerable to the public because democracy is exercised so much in local school districts," he said. "They are closely monitored by the public. They have got to feel that this superintendent, their CEO, is not going to take them down the primrose path and get them lost. If he does, they know they are going to take a public beating."

Grosse said without trust, boards and superintendents "start second-guessing each other." A constant "grapevine of rumors" surrounds school districts, and "if there is no trust, it is easy to get angry or panicky" about the information that filters through. "If they don't get the truth, boards go somewhere else to get it," she said.

When trust is lacking, a climate of suspicion is created and "everything you do is subject to misinterpretation," said Superintendent Eugene Karol of the Calvert County Public Schools in Prince Frederick, Maryland.

The power of information

As many have remarked, "information is power." As the school district's chief administrator, the superintendent controls most of the information needed to understand and make decisions about the schools. Therefore, the way superintendents use communication is perhaps the biggest measure of their willingness to share power and can become the cornerstone of mutual trust.

The superintendent's role in keeping the board informed is critical to the creation of trust, but the board also has access to vital information, which is a source of power to be shared with the CEO. Besides sharing its own ideas and judgments about the way schools are and should be functioning, the board as a representative body is attuned to the attitudes of the community, which the superintendent must be aware of to be successful. Thus, the board has a major responsibility to communicate with the superintendent as well.

NSBA's guide, *Becoming A Better Board Member*, stresses that "communication is a two-way street." If a board member has a concern, he or she should call the superintendent and say so. The superintendent, in turn, should do the same. Superintendents depend on individual board members to keep them informed of community opinions and concerns, the guide said, and by acting as the eyes and ears for the superintendent in the community, board members can greatly assist the superintendent in knowing what is happening in the district. "Trust, confidence, open communication, and respect are the building blocks for a good working relationship with the superintendent," the report said.

Establishment of mutual trust should begin with the selection and employment of a new superintendent, but it also must be built up over time through actions by both the superintendent and the board. It should generate a feeling

of confidence that the other party is working actively to communicate the information you want and need. Confidence produces an easy, relaxed attitude about information—an absence of constant tension and no fear of surprises.

Avoid surprises

"No surprises!" That simple maxim is used constantly by superintendents and board members to sum up what should be the essence of their relationships. This maxim, however, only echoes the need for mutual trust. It refers directly to communication and information. If a board member or superintendent receives important information that should have been provided by the other, that is surprise information. And a surprise shouldn't occur if each party is informing the other fully under a relationship of trust.

An honest mistake, of course, is not ordinarily a breach of trust. Trusting relationships are designed to withstand such stresses and strains. And they do. Busy superintendents have lapses, and board members don't always remember to inform the superintendent about something they may have said in the community that filtered back to the central office. But the character of the oversight and the frequency of such incidents—and the underlying motives—are the factors that determine if trust is at stake.

Avoiding surprises at board meetings is important because it helps produce better decisions, said Jerry Parker, superintendent in Pekin, Illinois. "It means everyone can be better prepared, a proposition gets fair consideration and you can have a more productive discussion. It can only come from a high level of trust."

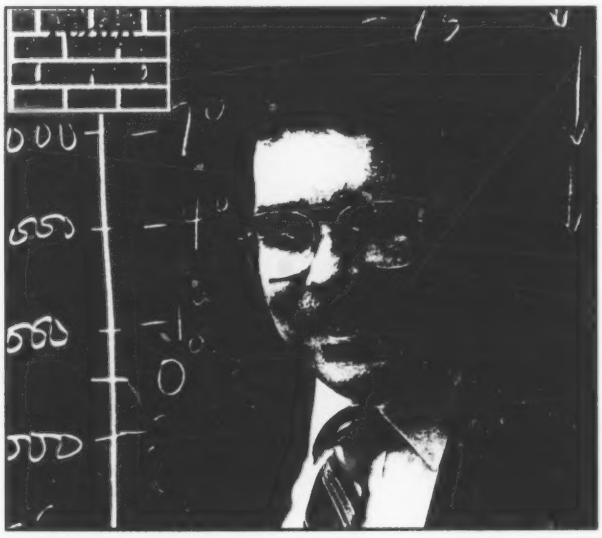
Parker said members of some boards occasionally may "spring something at a meeting for surprise effect" to get attention or to "showboat." A good way to reduce the chances of that happening is for the board to adopt a rule that topics or information will not be introduced at meetings without prior notice or clearance through the board president or superintendent.

Handle with care

Surprises cannot be eliminated totally, said Lewis W. Finch, superintendent Jefferson County, Colorado. "You try to minimize them by saying to each other that if you get a surprise, handle it with care and dignity," he said. The agreement should be that board members and the superintendent do not make a public issue of it. "How you handle it is 90 percent of getting caught by surprise," he said. "But if you get caught too often, then you wonder if people [you are working with] are open."

Avoiding surprises involves communicating information in a timely fashion between the board and superintendent, said Art Gosling, superintendent of the Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools. "Board members don't want to be caught at a party with a community member who asks, 'What about this or that?' and they can't respond. Maybe it's a major issue in the schools that is starting to bubble. Members need to feel they are a vital part of the process and the superintendent is providing them with good, sound information so they are kept informed."

Lester D. Plotner, superintendent of the Lincoln Elementary School District No. 27 in Illinois, said the "'no surprise' concept works very well for the board-superintendent relationship" in his district. "I keep them well informed about district matters via a weekly board memo and openly discuss any matter with board members which may or may not be troublesome for the school district. In return, board members call me when something or someone stirs in the district which needs explanation or some attention. We try hard not to create 'surprises' at board meetings which could make one or the other and possibly both parties look bad in the eyes of the public."



Ways to keep boards informed

Thus, superintendents and board members alike are measured by the crucible of communication—their abili-

ties to keep each other informed. But how should superintendents keep their boards informed? How often? In what amounts? And what information?

Just as there is no formula for the perfect board-superintendent relationship, there is no pat answer to the question of how to keep a board informed. But there is an easy way to find out: by communicating.

Information is one of those crucial subjects about which boards and superintendents should reach clear agreement either at contract-signing time or shortly thereafter. This agreement needs to establish the mutually-agreed on methods, levels and kinds of information to be communicated. And to keep this information-flow agreement current, it should be reviewed periodically to make certain it is working to everyone's satisfaction.

How to provide information

"Some boards like to receive information in conversation, some in writing," said consultant Jim Huge. "The superintendent and board should work together on how to provide information. Then every three months, the superintendent should ask the board, 'Are you getting the information you want the way you want it?'"

The Budget Process:

Does It Turn the Board On or Off?

Many board members and superintendents often look on the budget-making process as a routine task that ranks low on their priority list of things they'd rather do.

But Robert Heller, professor of educational administration at the State University of New York at Buffalo and a frequent consultant to school boards, says budget preparation can and often does play a critical role in developing a healthy, collaborative relationship.

Why? Because it determines whether the board is involved in one of the most important policy-making functions of all: deciding how to spend the available funds and to match resources with the district's fundamental goals and purposes.

Budget suggestions

Heller offers these suggestions for a sound budget process:

- The earlier the board is involved in the process the better, so that members are consulted in the actual building of the budget.
- At early meetings between the board, superintendent, and staff, discussions should focus on fundamental goals and objectives.
- The superintendent and staff then can develop a draft of the budget as a starting point for review. This is important because it is easier to generate full discussions with a concrete set of figures as the basis.
- At this point, a broad-based citizens advisory committee should be invited to sit in on the meetings and advise the board. Such committees are valuable because they tend to bring credibility to the process, and they serve as a communication link to the community at large.
- Public hearings should then be held on a proposed budget produced by the board, committee, and super-

Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New York at Buffalo said boards and superintendents can discuss the information flow at retreats or during evaluations. These discussions also may help let boards know the volume of their requests for information. "I know one superintendent who made a list of board requests and it was pages long," Heller said. "He passed it out at a meeting, and they were amazed at what they had been asking for. They realized they had to control their requests."

Gosling said keeping board members informed is a responsibility that both he and his staff must continually focus on. "Sometimes I fail to anticipate an item that will impact on the board if it doesn't know about it," he said. "Then, there is a tendency for a lot of the staff to underinform. I find myself frequently saying to my assistant superintendent, 'We have to get this to the board!' The role of the superintendent includes not getting sucked into a tendency of the staff to try to keep things private and to recognize that only the superintendent may have a reading on the level of information needed by the board."

Boards must decide

Becoming a Better Board Member emphasizes that

intendent and staff. Members of the citizens committee should speak on behalf of the budget at the hearings because this demonstrates to the media and those present that the community has been involved actively.

- Final adoption of the budget then will reflect integral participation of the board as the public's representatives and of the community itself through the citizens group.

Sense of ownership

Heller said involvement of the board at the outset of the budget process is vital because "if the superintendent comes to the board after the fact, so to speak, the board will not feel the same sense of ownership" and will be less likely to fight for its support in the community. Board support of the budget sometimes boils down to a question of whether the board sees the budget as "ours" or "his."

Heller said it is also important for the board and superintendent "to start out by talking about goals and their commitment to goals. Then when they have agreed on shared goals, they can build a budget based on those goals."

This linkage, he said, "gives more legitimacy to the budget because the budget then reflects goals for the schools and represents what the budget means for children and the community."

New methods for winning public support of schools budgets are necessary because increasingly citizens are raising questions about the rising cost of schools resulting in higher taxes.

"If a board member questions an expenditure in the budget," Heller said, "the superintendent can say, 'But these (expenditures) are your goals.' And if someone attacks the budget, they have to attack the goals for the district, not just some numbers on paper. It is much more likely that the board will stand tall for the budget if it is seen as embodying their goals."

Heller added that "it is difficult to get people to think in those terms," but it can make a big difference in successfully justifying and defending a proposed budget to the public.

New methods for winning public support of school budgets are necessary because "increasingly citizens are raising questions about the rising cost of schools resulting in higher taxes."

"Schools need to develop broader bases of community involvement and public support and use of citizens committees creates greater probability of getting that support," he said. "It is not a case of should or shouldn't—shared decision making with communities is coming in some form or other. Boards and superintendents should be proactive and go out and secure that involvement to achieve their goals for schools."

information-sharing works both ways—boards also need to decide how they want to communicate with their superintendents. And special consideration should be given to how the board president, as a conveyor of information, should interact with the superintendent, it said. Discussions on information needs is necessary, the report said, because individual members' preferences may differ. Some members may want considerable information and have the time to study it. Others may be subject to "an overdose of data," it said. These discussions also need to take place when board members change. One board's information needs may be different from another's.

Hentges said the "last district I worked for didn't want to hear from me. We met once a month and an occasional newsletter was fine. Now the board wants to hear more. Not quantity but quality. So I initiated a lot of communication. But it didn't work. Now we communicate when we need to."

Methods vary

The methods of keeping boards informed range from regular memos and telephone calls to frequent study sessions and retreats. The number and frequency of such contacts depends on the level worked out by the individual board and superintendent. Face-to-face contact is best, many say. "Meeting together or on an individual basis provides more freedom to bring up things and talk candidly," consultant Charles Raab said.

A considerable number of superintendents surveyed for this report also said that personal conversations are key ways they maintain strong relationships with their boards. But because of busy schedules, personal contact often can take place at only regular board meetings, making other forms of communication necessary.

Weekly memos are used widely by superintendents to summarize events and activities for board members. Bulletins are sent to report on unusual events, such as a fire, or future actions, such as an important board function. Special reports may run longer if detailed explanations of topics, such as the adoption of a new program, are required.

Superintendents frequently say they use a combination of such written communications along with routine telephone calls. "Some superintendents like to pick up the phone and talk to each member," Huge said. Some superintendents and board members communicate best verbally and others in writing. The fax machine also is becoming more widely used, and some superintendents even send audiotape messages to update members. Can videotape be far behind?

Many CEOs also make a practice of distributing informative magazine and newspaper articles, professional association publications and reports, copies of important district documents, state or federal reports, district newsletters, and bulletins that will help keep board members abreast of developments. But again, they are only useful if board members want them and will read them.

The NSBA guide noted that some boards adopt a policy outlining the circumstances and methods for communication "in order to reduce any suspicion of favoritism on the part of the superintendent, undue influence or pressure." It helps assure that all board members are treated alike—a topic that will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

How to request information

Becoming a Better Board Member also recommends that the board and superintendent should reach agreement on how board members should request information. Boards also can adopt policies that set clear priorities for the administration to follow in responding to members' requests. The report cautions that if the response to a request will take considerable time to prepare, it should probably come from the full board. Otherwise, individual members can bog down the superintendent and staff with requests.

Although some boards have complained that superintendents flood them with excessive information, many superintendents say it is better to provide too much than too little. But they make sure it is useful and needed information, and not trivia.

"It's important that they know as much as I know," said Thomas Payzant, superintendent of the San Diego City Schools. He also makes sure the board has more than enough information. Payzant does not call board members regularly, but urges them to call him when they need to talk. He also makes sure that mail sent to members at the district is delivered each day to their homes. "Keeping them informed is vital," he said.

Treat everybody the same

Without exception, superintendents, board members, and consultants state emphatically that all board members must be given the same information. It may sound obvious, but some superintendents—and board members, too—apparently don't appreciate the importance of that dictum and get into trouble by ignoring it. Since information is so valued and access is such a sensitive matter, unequal treatment—even if done innocently—can have serious repercussions. Some board members who are not treated equally are likely to suspect favoritism, which will inevitably destroy trust.

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For superintendents, Underwood said, "the worst thing you can do is to talk to only a few members. If the superintendent has something to say, he should make sure he says it to all members." That's why he thinks written correspondence is best—because the communication can be identical for everyone. Huge said if one member receives material that others don't get, it can be the germ of a big problem, and it's incredible how often it occurs." Consultant Richard Foster added, "When any member asks for information, make sure that copies [of the reply] go to all members. Keeping everyone up to date on the same information is a must."

Norbert Schuerman, superintendent of the Omaha School District No. 1 in Nebraska, said in keeping board members informed, superintendents should go beyond providing an abundance of information and just provide backup for their positions. "They should give boards credit for being able to understand," he said. "Boards are not always informed but they have more information than meets the eye. You should involve them and solicit their thoughts and ideas."

Schuerman said sharing information "implies shared decision making." In fact, if information is power, as so many say, then sharing information is sharing power. Framed in that manner, anything less than good communication and a free exchange of information between boards and superintendents is likely to undermine their relationships.

This conclusion underscores the fact that the commitment of the board and superintendent to keeping each other informed is much more important than any particular mode of conveying information. Their shared philosophy of open communication is what will make it work.

What's the point?

But what is the point of good communication and trust? Both should lead to an exploration and sharing of ideas, values, and goals for building better schools, says Conrad Briner, retired professor from the Claremont Graduate School in California. They should be part of a "process to seek new ideas and be experimental," he said. Otherwise, trust is all but meaningless, Briner said.

Karol echoed Briner's sentiment. "It's important for the board and superintendent to realize what the purpose of their roles is and why we are here—for kids—and it's not phony," he said.

Communications should center on "role expectations for *performance*" of the board and superintendent, he said., "They should use ideas as a means of communication and for bringing them closer together, to see what kinds of values they share," he said. "What do we think about these issues? What is causing these problems?"

Glue for relationships

In Briner's approach, by getting to know each other on these grounds, boards and superintendents can create a bond of shared learning and decision making focused on a renewed pursuit of educational accomplishment. He believes a mission or vision, coupled with action, will serve as the glue for securing a strong relationship.

"It has to start with a constant search and questioning, and doubting what they are doing is not good enough," Briner said. "They should examine ideas together and be gutsy enough to try experimentation. They need to build political support. They shouldn't be afraid to be aggressive about trying new things and of failing. They can get the support of the parents and the communities if they try and plan to do it. They should get away from spending time tinkering with policies and avoiding the major policy considerations. Boards and superintendents can get along wonderfully in this context."

It is a different dimension of communication, but one that gives priority to the substance of what communicating and trust are all about.

The impact on roles

If communication is shared as a basis for true collaborative decision making, as most successful boards and superintendents practice it, then roles—as defined separately—are less important. The difficult task of determining appropriate roles is more easily managed because successful teams operate almost as a single unit.

As R. Larry Stucky, superintendent in Rittman, Ohio, put it, "It is impossible to strictly define the difference between policy and administration. It is more important that the board and superintendent develop honestly open communications with each other and develop a high trust level."

If communication is shared as a basis for true collaborative decision making, as most successful boards and superintendents practice it, then roles—as defined separately—are less important.

Ed Milliken, superintendent of the Board of Cooperative Educational Services No. 2 in Patchogue, New York, said that even though the dividing line between roles is cloudy, "collaborative effort and constant communication should overcome the 'murky' area." And, thus, "crossing over" into each other's domain shouldn't be so necessary, he said. The "gray areas" usually can be made "workable on a situational basis if both view their relationship as mutually reinforcing," Ed Goodwin, superintendent of the Perry Public Schools in Ohio, added.

Separation of roles is really an "artificial distinction," said William G. Keane, superintendent of the Oakland Public Schools in Waterford, Michigan. "Superintendents must suggest areas of policy for board consideration. Boards need to advise superintendents on the consequences of administrative action. It's a team effort."

"I believe it is a collaborative effort with the traditional lines sometimes being crossed," said Emmett W. Lippe, superintendent of the Williamston Community Schools in Pennsylvania. In fact, said Michael O. Emlaw, superintendent of the Washtenaw Intermediate School District in Ann Arbor, Michigan, crossover is "inevitable, so we should plan for it instead of pretending it shouldn't happen."

Agreement on meddling

Everyone seems to agree that the superintendent should be given the responsibility for program management without unilateral interference from the board. "A lot of boards want to get involved in how to do it," said Barbara Wheeler, a board member in Community High School District No. 99 in Downers Grove, Illinois. "I say that's not our job. If the goals are not accomplished, then get a new superintendent. But we must be willing to step back and let the superintendent do his or her job. Otherwise, the board is out of control."

If boards meddle in administration, she said, they get into "nonobjective evaluations based on hearsay, and they don't understand all the things going on in a classroom. They don't have the expertise to make those judgments." They waste time that should be devoted to their fundamental responsibility for policy making, Wheeler said. "So much of our time is spent on brick and mortar issues as it is," she said. "If we are constantly dealing with balancing the budget and with parents, it is going to affect how the board functions."

If friction develops over roles, however, it affects much more than the school district and its leaders. When friction occurs, it undercuts public confidence in public schools, Florence Baugh, a member of the Buffalo Board of Education, said. "Board-superintendent conflict projects a poor image to the community about what is happening to children," she said. "It erodes community support and the ability of the community to unify around a common concern—the education of children. And community support determines an adequate level of financial support and a community climate for schools to succeed in." Good or bad, it all "results in the kind of education that children receive," she added.

Basic parameters needed

Therefore, some basic parameters should be established around roles, Mary Jason, a board member of the East Jordan, Michigan, Public Schools, said. Within those parameters are the management style of the superintendent and the traditions of board involvement, she said. "But board members need to be reminded that even with the best of intentions, they can cross over the boundaries and make promises they shouldn't, and the system gets out of whack."

Successful boards, Jason said, first determine the kinds of skills they want in a superintendent, search for and select that person, and then build their relationship from there. "The trick is to hire for those skills and if you are going to have an ongoing relationship, it should be formed during the early period based on rapport, respect, and communication."

Hentges agreed that a good relationship emanates from the hiring process where "role expectations" are established. "On the positive side you have the team analogy," he said. "On the negative side, you don't have collaboration, which results in an unsteady alliance and you get into battles of trust and confidence. If there is a lack of congruency of expectations, there is a tendency to be protective of turfs and issues will surface. If there is a lack of flexibility [in roles], it means you don't trust the superintendent to be responsive to the needs of the community."

Put roles in writing

Hentges and others, including AASA and NSBA, strongly urge that role expectations be in writing. As was discussed in Chapter 6, the basic outlines of roles should be part of the superintendent's hiring contract. But they should be spelled out in more detail in board policies or other documents. "They can be as simple as handwritten notes designed to resolve disagreements," he said. "Each year, or whenever the superintendent's evaluation is performed, that document should be reviewed. It should also be updated and reviewed when new members are elected as part of a role expectations workshop."

"Talking About the Superintendent's Employment Contract," an AASA-NSBA report says the contract and other

agreements, such as policies or documents covering role expectations, should be reviewed when new members take office, and they should receive copies. "It is important that new board members know they are parties to, and are bound by, the contract—even though it may have been approved by their predecessors," the report said.

It is easy to imagine how the failure to inform new members about their obligations under such agreements could cause confusion in their minds over roles and their own responsibilities to fulfill them.

Routinely reviewing roles and responsibilities is part of the previously mentioned hard work required to maintain strong relationships. This activity is one of the key recommendations of the IEL report. "An effective board, in consultation with its superintendent, works out and periodically reaffirms the separate areas of administrative and policy responsibilities and how these separations will be maintained," it said. "Misunderstandings will occur unless boards work diligently to clarify who is responsible for what and where responsibilities must be shared."

In sum, consultant Charles Young said, "if they can get a leg up on mutual trust and the free flow of information, and expect differences but use them to sharpen priorities, boards and superintendents can build effective problem-solving teams and good relationships."

Tips from the Trenches:

What We Do To Strengthen the Board-Superintendent Relationship . . .

How some superintendents meet the challenge

"Allow plenty of time for discussions in executive sessions. Plan time for retreats to cover important items. Constant positive feedback when jobs are well done."

—Harry Amend, Freeman Public Schools, Rockford, Washington.

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"I have made materials available to each member and have spent time going over the material at special meetings."

—Ron Broeker, McKenzie County Public School District, Watford City, North Dakota.

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"Informal and formal meetings with the board and superintendent to discuss concerns, goals, etc. Regularly scheduled school visitations. Weekly superintendent's letter to board members."

—Frank Cleary, Fort Bragg Public Schools, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

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"'News and Notes'--[a] six- to ten-page memo prior to each meeting, daily phone messages, social and conference associations."

—Alvin Coleman, Pottsgrove School District, Pennsylvania.

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"Monthly one-on-one meeting, weekly update reports, availability."

— Howard K. Conley, Chandler Unified School District No. 80, Arizona.

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"Strategic planning process to establish five-year goals, annual target objectives, weekly work/study sessions."

—Ronald G. Crawford, Snohomish School District, Washington.

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"Openness, honesty, integrity, no surprises!"

—Charles L. Cummins Jr., Laurens County School District, Clinton, South Carolina.

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"Be available to each other. Meet one-on-one and listen to their ideas."

—LeRoy E. Dyer, Portland Public Schools, Connecticut.

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"Frank conversation with all members of the board present. Board/staff retreats with open-ended agendas."

—Robert Y. Dubel, Baltimore County Public Schools, Towson, Maryland.

***

"Best method is just to talk, communicate on an informal basis, reason and explain."

—Virgil R. Erdelt, Steele-Dawson Public Schools, North Dakota.

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"Good written contract; open communication (immediate discussion of possible problems); systematic training and orientation of board members; clear definition of roles and responsibilities; goal setting, reporting, accountability, and keeping board informed and involved in appropriate activities."

—A. Glen Everhart, Haverstraw/Stony Point School District, Garnerville, New York.

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"Open communications between superintendent and board, feeling of trust—they trust me and I trust they back me—and clear understanding of goals and objectives."

—Rolland L. Fenster, Diller Community Schools, Nebraska.

***

"Informal evaluation prior to formal evaluation [and] schedule enough time for committee meetings so issues are thoroughly discussed."

—E.N.Garno, Upper Deerfield Township Schools, Seabrook, New Jersey.

***

"Regular memos detailing for the board recent events, problems, etc., [and] periodic planning meetings for the board and superintendent to discuss without action on future plans, problems."

—Ed Goodwin, Perry Public Schools, Ohio.

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"Jointly developed job targets, off-site workshops with opportunity to discuss mutual roles, and comprehensive performance appraisals with dialogue about strengths and weaknesses."

—Dale L. Grabinski, West Des Moines Community School District, Iowa.

***

"A weekly update is sent from me to trustees. It's one page. Board packets are comprehensive and are sent out at least four days prior to monthly meetings."

—Jean Hagan, Hamilton Public Schools, Montana.

***

"Quarterly retreats to discuss strategic plan. It includes process of communication and is product oriented. Constant communication, written and verbal."

—Jim Hager, Beaverton School District 48, Oregon.

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"Good communications, written and oral. Keep board informed about all facets of the school organization. Develop an agenda that has excellent background on each item."

—Max O. Helm, Geary County Schools, Junction City, Kansas.

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"Clear direction from the board on the vision and goals for the district. Development of a document called Board/Superintendent Operating Principles. The board stays out of the details of running the district."

—Eugene R. Hertzke, Central Kitsap School District, Silverdale, Washington.

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"Frequent written and direct communication. Mutual trust. No surprise relationship."

—William E. Hodges, Stillwater Public Schools, Oklahoma.

***

"Regular individual meetings over coffee, breakfast, or lunch. Daily electronic mail messages for the total board."

—Chris L. Huber, Spring Lake Park Independent School District No. 16, Minnesota.

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"Outside consultant, role analysis skills, let them have their say, know when to fight and when not to."

—Harvey Kaufman, Cortland Enlarged City School District, New York.

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"Send a weekly newsletter to the board about events since last meeting. Schedule two or three special study sessions each year for in-depth, relaxed discussions of different issues without need for a vote. Personally attend all school board association meetings as a show of support and to contribute advice when necessary."

—William G. Keane, Oakland Public Schools, Waterford, Michigan.

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"Always be open and honest when dealing with the board either as a group or as individuals. A sense of humor will disarm potentially explosive situations. Be a good listener and don't be defensive if criticism is leveled at you. Be friendly and 'down to earth' when dealing with the board or any of the publics."

—Rodney Koch, Cozad City Schools, Nebraska.

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"Annual board retreat with much interaction. Used a consultant to establish mutual trust."

—Emmett W. Lippe, Williamston Community Schools, Michigan.

***

"Extensive system of communications, two-way and written and verbal. Sharing information. Planning

sessions [with] questions, goals, and initiatives."

—Ed Milliken, Board of Cooperative Services No. 2, Patchogue, New York.

***

"Before and after each board election, a comprehensive workshop for board candidates and then newly elected board members is held. Annually, the board and I hold one or more retreats to discuss pressing issues and communication. Our superintendent's evaluation process mandates a review of the district work plan three times a year."

—Homer F. Mincy, Upper Arlington City School District, Ohio.

***

"Board/superintendent evaluation is two-way. Superintendent shares all information requested by a single board member with entire board. Superintendent and board work as a committee of the whole."

—Thomas W. Payzant, San Diego City School District, California.

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"When the board evaluates the superintendent, they provide an opportunity for the superintendent to give his review of how he perceives the board as an operational unit within the confines of board responsibilities."

—Lester D. Plotner, Lincoln Elementary School District No. 27, Illinois.

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"Retreats to clarify roles, workshops to hammer out alternative solutions, and regular breakfast/luncheon one-on-one sessions."

—Leonard E. Roberts, Bloomington Public Schools, Illinois

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"At the end of each board meeting, we sit around for about a half hour and discuss anything and everything."

—Rich Schlesselman, Walthill Public Schools, Nebraska.

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"Frequent discussions of where we're going, constant communication (notes, phone calls) with board, and evaluation sessions every four to six months."

—Ralph Sloan, Norwalk Public Schools, Connecticut.

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"Orientation programs [for new members]. Individual meetings when inappropriate behavior occurs. Board self-evaluation and superintendent evaluation based on mutually agreed on objectives."

—Frank Tota, Roanoke City Schools, Virginia.

***

"Annual retreats to facilitate open, honest communications, to air concerns, and to establish mutual goals for more effective working relationships. Study sessions for critical issues, providing opportunities to explore the range of views in a nonthreatening, nonpolitical environment."

—Eugene Tucker, Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District, California.

***

"Have an information item on the agenda for each board meeting to keep the board current on school issues. Invite board members to attend meetings with me, which makes them feel a part of decisions."

—Wilfred Volesky, Rhame Public Schools, North Dakota.

***

"Weekly mailings to board on variety of issues. Calls to board before issues get in paper. Agreement to tell each other if concerns are building or sensitivities breached."

—John A. Whritner, Greenwich Public Schools, Connecticut.

***

"Respond to questions raised by board members. If you don't know the answer at the time of the question, make it a point to find the answer and get back to the board. Keep the board informed on issues and the operation of the agency. Yearly evaluation."

—Kenneth C. Wilcox, Educational Service Unit 16, Ogallala, Nebraska.

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What board presidents say their boards do

"We encourage people to follow the chain of command and stay out of the day-to-day running of the district. If there appears to be a problem, we talk about it as soon as possible."

—Kenneth J. Anderson, Preston Community Schools, Iowa.

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"Informed, direct, individual communications. Quarterly review of superintendent (with the superintendent asked to review the school committee as well). Annual review of superintendent."

—Louis P. Amoruso, Mansfield Public Schools, Massachusetts.

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"Roundtable discussions. 'Breaking bread' together."

—Anonymous.

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"Mediator/consultant has met with board and full administrative team to do team-building and goal-setting."

—Anonymous.

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"Regular evaluation. Immediate resolution of misunderstanding."

—Derek Fasking, Igo-Ono-Platina Union High School District, California.

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"We agree that we can disagree with one another so long as we are not 'disagreeable.' No matter how difficult it may be, be candid with one another."

—David Hausman, West Monona School District, Onawa, Iowa.

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"No surprise policy. Immediate information and open discussions."

—J. Spencer Helmers, Owen J. Roberts School District, Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

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"The board president meets on a weekly basis with the superintendent. Telephone communications on a daily basis. Work sessions are held once a month with board and superintendent."

—Robert J. Holland, Anamosa Community School District, Iowa.

***

"Get together in social settings besides business sessions."

—Ralph Jansen, Exeter Public Schools, Nebraska.

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"Constant communication with all board members. Pose potentially difficult questions to superintendent outside of formal board meetings."

—John L. Lemega, West Hartford Public Schools, Connecticut.

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"Self-evaluation. Attending social school functions together. Workshop on any issue of concern."

—Pam Mullarky, St. Johns County Public Schools, St. Augustine, Florida.

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"Meeting between board president and superintendent prior to board meetings to coordinate agenda, include concerns of all parties, and avoid surprising or embarrassing the other at open meetings. Frequent communication between board members and superintendent to discuss matters of interest in a timely manner."

—Abigail L. Roseman, Black Oak Mine Unified School District, Georgetown, California.

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"Sharing and developing goals for the district as a team. Communication using electronic mail."

—Robert L. Townsend, Broadalbin-Perth Central School District, Amsterdam, New York.

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"We have used a written document called a board directive which serves to document our mutual understanding of projects of special interest to the board. We have three monthly meetings, one for policy development, plus a work session in advance of the regular meeting. Also, any member is free to meet with [the superintendent] at any time to share concerns/information."

—Doris Wakeland, Silver Consolidated School District No. 1, Silver City, New Mexico.

Operating Principles Board/Administration

The following set of "Operating Principles" was developed by the board of directors of the Central Kitsap School District in Silverdale, Washington, and Superintendent Eugene R. Hertzke. Since their adoption in 1988, the principles—written in unusually clear and to-the-point language—have been very effective in helping the board and superintendent establish fair mutual expectations, which have served to strengthen their working relationship, Hertzke said.

INTRODUCTION

Operating principles define the beliefs, values, and methods of working together. Successful organizations are the result of effective and dynamic leadership. To assure quality operations, leaders must agree on basic ways of working together.

Recognizing that individuals are unique and important will enhance our operating principles and develop a high level of organizational self-esteem and confidence. The manner in which the Board and Administration conduct their business becomes a model throughout the District for students, teachers, parents, and staff on how problems are solved.

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The following principles outline a philosophy of cooperative behavior that is agreed upon by Board members and Administration. As members of the management team, we agree to abide by these principles:

COMMUNICATIONS/ COOPERATION AND SUPPORT

Board and Administration: Recognize that open communication requires trust, respect, and a fundamental belief in goodwill among Board members and staff. Work to minimize misunderstandings and reduce conflict. Address disagreements privately. Agree to:

- Support each other constructively and courteously.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Allow ourselves and others the freedom to admit mistakes.
- Focus our discussion on issues, not personalities—free of defensiveness.
- Encourage constructive disagreement.
- Balance our honesty with sensitivity toward others.
- Uphold the integrity of every individual.
- Pursue thorough understanding.
- Involve those parties who will be affected by the decision and the solution.
- Commit to getting to know one another and the ideas and issues that are important to that individual.

EFFECTIVE MEETINGS

No surprises

Board: Share ideas about new programs and new directions with the Superintendent and key staff or other members of the Board when appropriate before presenting major proposals publicly.

Administration: Bring matters to the Board in a timely fashion. Present programs/projects well enough in advance that suggestions for change proposed by the Board can be addressed without upsetting activities already "in motion."

Be prepared

Board: Read all materials-call and ask questions in advance. Seek clarification and information as needed. When possible explain to the Superintendent in advance about major concerns about a proposal.

Administration: Develop recommendations that combine the best interests of students and the needs of the District with the focus and direction the Board generally wishes to take. Board input to the goal-setting process can provide direction here.

Disagree without becoming disagreeable:

Board: Use executive sessions to address complaints related to staff. Try to resolve major disagreements with one another or staff in private.

Administration: State your position but accept the will of the majority of the Board and make every effort—in action and in spirit—to follow through.

All: Disagree with each other in a positive and constructive fashion. Watch "tone of voice," "choice of words," and other actions that spell the difference between discussion, debate, and argument. Handle personal/personnel concerns in private. Give as much attention to the manner in which you disagree with people as you do to the particular issue.

Handling controversy at meetings

Board: Develop an agreed-upon procedure for dealing with controversy and sensitive issues at meetings. For example, agree that the President may call a short recess if it appears that people need to "regroup" or regain composure. Talk with agitated people privately.

Or, agree to call a special meeting to deal with a topic that appears likely to take the entire night and/or may branch off into personnel/executive session arenas. It may mean another meeting, but it could provide a cooling-off period, an opportunity to discuss the issue with staff to be better prepared, and a time for concentrated attention to the issue.

The Board never takes final action on a complaint during the meeting at which it is presented. While we will respond in a timely fashion, we need to allow ourselves the time to give the issue the review and study it warrants.

The Board does not hear specific complaints related to individual staff members in open session. To protect the rights of individuals we schedule these concerns for executive session.

Request that large groups identify a spokesperson and clearly establish time limits for speakers when large numbers of people wish to speak.

Administration: Resolve complaints at administrative levels outside the Board arena (example: the textbook complaint process), but prepare and forewarn the Board if a concern is likely to come its way. Assist the Board in upholding Board guidelines for dealing with controversial situations at meetings. For example, if the Board President calls a short recess in order to defuse a situation, use the break to make a personal effort to calm people (i.e., don't just sit back and let the Board handle everything alone).

> *The Board will never take final action on a complaint during the meeting at which it is presented. We need to allow ourselves time to give the issue the review and study it warrants.*

DECISION MAKING

The identification and evaluation of alternatives, an awareness of short- and long-term consequences, an appreciation for the needs of the group as well as individuals, and sensitivity toward collective action are essential to the decision-making process.

Board and Administration: In order to formulate and execute sound decisions, we agree to:

- Resolve problems at the lowest level possible.
- Clearly communicate decisions.
- Build into each decision a point of reevaluation.

• Provide for input from all concerned.
• Use a decision-making style appropriate to the situation.
• Establish a rationale for each decision.
• Make decisions consistent with our expressed goals.
• Communicate the rationale for making a decision that has been superseded by a higher level of authority to those involved before releasing the information.

DEALING WITH CITIZEN OR STAFF COMPLAINTS

Board and Administration: Agree upon a process for dealing with complaints and the actions that will be taken when a Board member or administrative staff member is contacted by a community member who has a complaint. For example:

• Listen to the individual's concern.
• Inquire if the individual has discussed the issue with the person immediately responsible. If this has not been done, tell them how to contact the appropriate person.
• Explain the District process for resolving concerns and conflicts. Describe the appropriate channels that should be followed if the complaint is not resolved.
• Explain that, as a final resource, a complaint can be submitted to the Board, but that the Board practice is to carefully investigate complaints before taking any actions. Explain that complaints raised against individuals cannot be addressed in a public meeting.
• Be cautious of giving the appearance of agreeing with the person; sometimes just listening makes people think you are on "their side." Remember that anything you say might be understood as the "position of the Board or the Administration."

Possible responses

• Board members should take the initiative to suggest to the Chair, "This issue might best be handled by the Superintendent and/or staff. It's not that we aren't interested, but the Superintendent is the person we hire to deal with these very issues."
• Unanticipated controversy that is a non-agenda item should not be allowed to dominate an otherwise well-planned meeting. Stating up front that "There is a time limit and the concern will be dealt with formally at the next Board meeting as an "agenda item" is an appropriate response.
• When involved parties become emotional, the situation can be defused by saying, "I recognize that this is a very important issue to you. We need a chance to gather more information. Our Superintendent will work with you to resolve this problem. Thank you for coming."

A successful, productive and efficient Board must agree upon a process for dealing with complaints and the actions that will be taken when a Board member or administrative staff member is contacted by a community member who has a complaint.

DEVELOPMENT, ADMINISTRATION, AND REVIEW OF BOARD POLICY

Board: Exercise final approval over all policies. Study administrative reports on the implementation of policies and the effectiveness of policies. Once policies are approved by the majority of the members of the Board, support them even though you may have spoken against them initially.

Administration: Advise and assist the Board in developing policy. Share concerns about ideas that may not work. Once in place, support the policies of the Board whether or not you are in full

agreement. Inform the Board of the manner in which policies are being administered, and when and if they may need to be revised.

EVALUATION AND BOARD STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Board: Establish strong and fair policies related to the evaluation of all District staff. Serve as a role model to staff by evaluating the effectiveness of Board operations.

Administration: Support Board policies regarding evaluation and approach your own evaluation as well as the evaluation of those you supervise with the serious intent to work toward improvement. Serve as a role model to those you supervise through your own willingness to be evaluated.

All: Commit to being supportive of each other's need to be recognized and rewarded for achievements as well as to be counseled and assisted when concerns about performance arise.

Commit to being proactive in your own education, growth, and development and be supportive of the growth and development of others.

JUDGMENT AND TRUST

The complexities of operating a school district cannot be fully addressed in policy, procedures, or operating principles. Working with people and handling difficult and controversial issues on a daily basis requires good judgment, common sense, and a strong trust relationship between Board and staff. Every complaint cannot be resolved to the satisfaction of all parties involved; every issue or concern will not be foreseen. For these reasons, trust in each other, allowance for error, and team efforts to address problems are a key part of an effective school district operation.

ISSUES WHICH COME BEFORE THE BOARD

Information items

Board: Inform staff of significant concerns raised by District patrons. Make staff aware of issues/programs on which the Board wishes to be particularly well informed.

Administration: Keep the Board informed of all new developments and the progress of activities related to Board goals and major programs. Be sure to inform the Board in advance of any complaint, concern, or issue likely to come before the Board.

Input/option items

Board: Let the staff know about issues of concern and interest to the Board so that it is easier for the staff to distinguish between items the Board wishes to discuss and items staff should handle independently. Try to come to agreement on "option" items as a Board.

Administration: Bring to the Board in a timely fashion all issues, plans, or programs that meet the following criteria:

- Likely to be sensitive to the community.
- Major change in program thrust.
- Major cost item.
- Major deployment of staff.

The time frame for presenting such items to the Board should allow for Board deliberation and input. Staff should provide options and alternatives to the Board, which include the strengths and weaknesses of the options.

Board action items

Board: Read agenda materials, understand the issues, and be prepared to discuss action items.

Administration: Follow the pattern for determining Board action items established through the Roles and Responsibilities exercise. Use good judgment in comparing an issue to one discussed in the exercise and determining whether or not the issue needs Board action. Provide ample time for the Board to read about, study, and debate issues prior to voting.

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When Operating Principles are not followed, it is the responsibility of individual Board members to raise the issue and clarify the application of the guidelines.

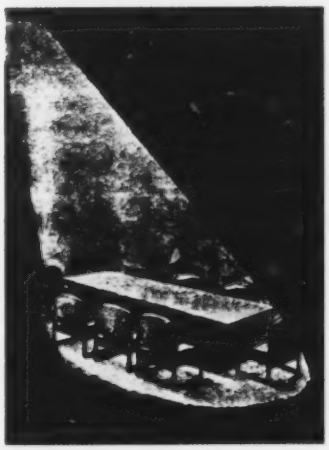
CHAPTER NINE

Making the Relationship Thrive:

It's Everybody's Responsibility

Creating a strong foundation for collaborative leadership by school boards and superintendents, as Chapter 9 stressed, is a necessary beginning. But it is not enough.

An enduring healthy relationship requires effective techniques, strategies, and methods so that true communication—a free exchange of information, trust, and shared decision making—can thrive.



This chapter will examine some of the ways successful boards and superintendents have created and maintained relationships that withstand the stresses and strains of today's fast-changing world. Their operational styles do not guarantee bliss, but they go far in explaining how these school systems have been able to meet the challenges inherent in the board-superintendent relationship. They help provide answers to some central questions, such as:

- How do they develop shared decision making?
- Does board training help?
- Do superintendents need to assume new roles?
- How do boards and superintendents handle problem board members?
- Are retreats effective in improving relationships?
- Does the use of consultants pay off?
- What can be done to create smoother board meetings and better agendas?

These are some of the issues that this chapter will explore.

Collaboration is the answer

A survey for this Critical Issues Report asked board members and superintendents how they developed the strengths of the relationships they described as excellent. The answer was loud and clear: through collaboration.

They attributed their successes to "joint efforts to seek good relationships" and "mutual understandings." The numerous comments on the surveys stressed how they had worked together constantly—employing good communications and information-sharing and seeking agreement on common expectations—to form healthy and trusting relationships. Notably absent as a secret of their success was any mention of individual accomplishment, such as the board doing something special or the superintendent performing on an exemplary basis. Their explanations confirmed the crucial importance of the basic elements of a strong relationship that were described in the last chapter.

Improving board skills

Practical strategies to achieve excellent communication and the other strengths, however, are needed to energize the relationship. One of the most important strategies is preparing both the board and the superintendent to embrace the concept of collaboration. A powerful consensus running through the published materials on school leadership, as well as the interviews and surveys for this report, holds that knowledge and understanding of shared decision making yields cooperative relationships. But the consensus also concludes that boards and superintendents do not

always recognize the benefits of conducting their operations jointly, nor do they know how to do it well.

Considering the time demands, community pressures, and often meager rewards, school boards perform a remarkable service to public education. With the added frustration of insufficient financial resources, some have come to regard board service as a thankless job, which helps explain the dearth of quality candidates for board positions. Yet many community-spirited citizens accept the responsibility in spite of the negatives. However, board members, superintendents and others agree that a number of well-intentioned board members need training to enable them to fulfill their roles more responsibly.

The Critical Issues Report survey found a large majority of board members already engaged in some kind of training for the position. Of the superintendents who were surveyed, 78 percent said their boards participated in formal programs to improve their skills. Among board presidents, 73 percent said they did.

What about the others?

While that may sound impressive, look at it the other way: one out of four board members *do not* participate in any training. If even a small portion of these people experience problems in functioning as effective board members, then their lack of preparation can have a detrimental impact on board-superintendent relations—and on the school district.

To reinforce that notion, an overwhelming 93 percent of the superintendents surveyed and 97 percent of the board presidents said training of board members definitely contributes to stronger board-superintendent relationships. Even in districts where boards do not engage in training, 87 percent of the superintendents and 63 percent of the board presidents thought it would help.

Superintendent Homer B. Smith of the Medina County School District in Ohio, said board training improves its effectiveness "by helping the board to better understand the board's role versus the superintendent's role." It helps because "the better informed the board is about its role, the more likely relations will be positive," said Leonard E. Roberts, superintendent of the Bloomington Public Schools in Illinois.

Lois M. McDonald, board president of the San Leandro, California, Unified School District, agreed that "as board members learn, I think it helps in their understanding of board and superintendent roles."

Many feel unprepared

Board members themselves say they need more training. Many feel "totally unprepared" for the responsibility, according to a survey of board members by the Institute for Educational Leadership. "New board members, it was felt, should be exposed to large amounts of information," said IEL's report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership."

"They should become more familiar with the organization and processes of school system operation and more aware of their unique role as members of a public governmental body," the report said. They should also be informed about "the ever-touchy realm of board-superintendent relationships and develop sensitivity to the nuances of what is policy and what is administration in the public school decision-making environment."

In *Becoming A Better Board Member*, NSBA concurred that board members are seriously hampered in achieving effectiveness if they lack training. And 90 to 95 percent of board members say they need more training, the guide said.

New board members need orientation and continuing exposure to new developments in the field and ways to improve their skills as leaders, the NSBA publication added. It contains a thorough discussion of the skills and knowledge that board members need and listed these as the key avenues for improvement:

- Annual board self-evaluations
- Board retreats
- Visits to schools
- Staff workshops or briefings
- Use of consultants
- Simulated exercises
- Attendance at NSBA and state association sessions and workshops.

"Urban Dynamics," a 1992 NSBA report, urged board members to "institute regular and systematic board self-evaluations" as a way to improve their performance. As Cyril O. Houle, author of *Governing Boards: Their Nature and Nurture*, put it, "The capacity for self-criti-

Board training improves effectiveness by helping the board to better understand the board's role versus the superintendent's role.

cism is the surest impetus for improving the quality of the board and the work it does." The NSBA report also recommended additional training on:

- Aspects of public service that are particularly sensitive, such as media scrutiny.
- Ways to be responsive to constituents and political concerns while maintaining the "corporate nature" of the board.
- Understanding the administrator's point of view.
- Exercising appropriate oversight, including fiscal accountability.

How to convince them?

Some board members do not avail themselves of the many training opportunities that exist because of time

Out of the Ashes:

New Relationship Strengthens, Blurs Roles

Out of the ashes from the longest teachers' strike in state history, the Edmonds School District No. 15 has risen to become an educational leader in the state of Washington with an award-winning school board.

Much of the district's success can be attributed to the strong relationship developed by the board and the superintendent, Brian Benzel. They made a conscious effort to define and adhere to their roles for governing and administering the district.

Their roles are classic, calling for the board to enact policies under which the district operates and the superintendent to implement those policies. But in actual practice, their roles tend to blend together to produce more of a unified mechanism for decision making with strengths that a model with carefully-divided powers might not enjoy.

School Board of the Year

The Edmonds board was named Washington School Board of the Year in 1989 by the State School Directors Association for districts with 5,000 or more students. The 19,000-student district in Lynnwood was honored for building the new board-superintendent relationship, as well as other accomplishments that followed the upheaval in 1987.

The 30-day strike came at the end of a period of severe organizational stress marked by an enrollment decline from about 30,000 in 1970 to about 16,500 in 1985. The board also was plagued by factions that gained and used information from various members of the staff to contest numerous controversial issues, including whether and how to go ahead with a school-site decision making plan. These circumstances created what was characterized as "a very political environment" in the district and community.

Shortly after the strike, which was primarily over teachers' demands for smaller classes and roles in shared decision making, several new board members were elected and the superintendent of eight years retired.

Open hiring process

One of the new board's first steps was "to open up the hiring process to the community," Benzel recalled as one of the candidates for the superintendency. "The three finalists presented themselves to the public at community forums where they described their proposed plans and were rated by teachers and parents. It showed that the board had a new outlook."

As the board's top choice, Benzel said he and members reached agreement at the outset on some core principles to guide their relationship. "They would use me as their principal staff person with questions and information going through me," he said. "I made clear that I wanted diversity of opinion, but that I was the CEO and information needed to come through me so all members got it equally, and I knew what they were getting. We all agreed the board needed to know what is going on in the district and that the board should not engage in daily management of its operations."

Benzel said he stressed that board members "have a right to know anything or everything, but the whole board should know—it creates a sense of connectiveness that is very important."

constraints as well as a belief that they do not need it. NSBA and state associations constantly urge their participation. So how can more be persuaded?

In many cases where relationships are good, the superintendents often have been the key to success. The caliber of a board "is part of what you create as superintendent," said Eugene Karol, superintendent of the Calvert County Public Schools in Prince Frederick, Maryland. "You need to mold the board into one that works well together. I don't mean manipulate it. It has to be for real. A superintendent has to serve as a catalyst."

The NSBA report noted that school board members in a 1980 survey identified "conversations with school superintendents" as one of the major ways that they developed as effective leaders.

Professor Robert Heller of the State University of New

Refining roles

During the ensuing months, Benzel and the board spent many special sessions refining their understandings about roles and responsibilities, guided by techniques of the Ventures for Excellence program created by consultant Vic Cottrell. The program consists of questionnaires and in-depth discussions with the board and superintendent to deal with the complexities of the roles in real-life situations, he said.

Benzel said that under the operating principles he and the board developed, the board "knows it can ask questions about anything I am doing and we are comfortable with shared decision-making roles." How does that translate into policy development? It works this way, Benzel said:

"Each year we review and set goals for the district. I start out by circulating a draft memo to the board outlining the goals for consideration as well as performance indicators. The memo reflects my work plan, which includes the ideas for new or revised goals that board members and I have discussed at various points, including during my preceding evaluation by the board. Then we hold public study sessions and discuss these plans, and the board injects ideas or suggests changes. Finally, we incorporate our agreements into the board's new leadership goals. They become the working plan for me and the staff."

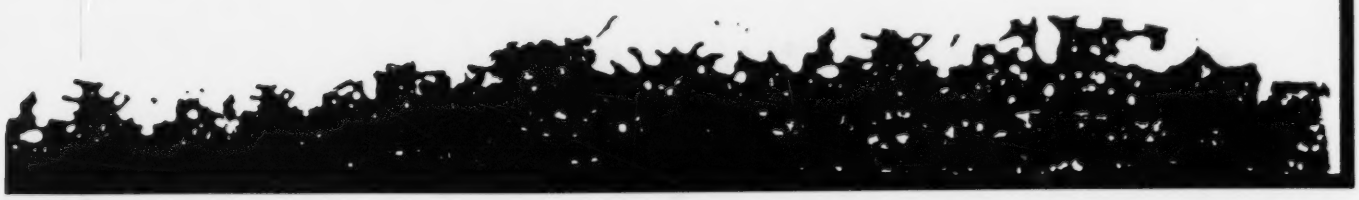
Wide-ranging goals

The goals cover a wide range of topics, he said, including finances, curriculum, staff development, community outreach, legislation, and board-superintendent relations. They are reviewed at mid-year.

"The board clearly has a policy-setting role," Benzel said. "I am to act on their behalf to develop plans to implement those policies. Sometimes the board says we need to develop a policy or changes the ones I have submitted.

"It creates a positive tension because they see me as an integral part of the board process and I see them as important counselors. In the implementation phase, if I see something that might be considered important, I run it by the board for feedback before I act. Often they raise points or questions that have been helpful to me. Their hammer is if I am not making good decisions then it will reflect on our relationship. Our roles turn out to be a real blurred thing. But that is the way it works best."

On its entry form for the Board of the Year judging, the Edmonds board declared that the operating principles it shares with Benzel have created "openness to new ideas, an absence of narrow special interests, and a clear focus on creating a learning organization for students and staff . . ."



York at Buffalo argues that superintendents and boards themselves "should be more aggressive" in encouraging members to participate in training. Even though board service is becoming increasingly time-consuming, Heller said, training has to be pushed.

He said some boards and superintendents who work well together have set up their own internal inservice programs and suggested other districts follow their example. Many nonprofit boards in the public sector conduct in-house orientation and training programs for their members. The superintendents should lead the way because of their strategic position as the chief administrative officer with the background and knowledge of the system. In this case, "The superintendent is to the board what a coach is to a team," Heller said.

Joint training works

Some superintendents said they have encouraged their boards to opt for training by offering to participate with them. This also provides a basis for common understanding about what is learned. "If the superintendent attends with them, it is a good way to reach consensus on better ways to operate," said Superintendent Dwight Stevens of the Stevens Point Public Schools in Wisconsin. "When board members attend alone, there is always this 'I know the answers and you don't' attitude, which at times creates a wedge in the working relationship."

Lee Etta Powell, superintendent-in-residence and professor of educational leadership at George Washington University, said joint training of board members and superintendents is valuable in several ways. One, it "helps board members develop greater understanding for the breadth and depth of the superintendent's responsibilities." Second, it enables boards to gain a better understanding of the impact of state and national education policies when the CEOs are there to place them in local context. As a result, board members and superintendents get to know each other better, which fosters cooperation, she said.

More recently, calls for different and better training of board members have been increasing. "Like any other staff development, its effectiveness depends on who is running the sessions," Norbert Schuerman, superintendent of the Omaha School District No. 1 in Nebraska, said. "If it's done the wrong way, it won't cut it."

He said board members need more than the typical lecture-type instruction. They need to participate in role-playing, "in-basket" exercises, small-group problem solving, and other kinds of activities that allow them to develop solutions to situational problems. Even though they are short on time, more board members will attend training sessions if they see them as more useful, he believes.

Focus on decision making

Others argue that in addition to, or perhaps partly in place of the volumes of factual information conveyed in board training programs, the content should focus more on leadership and decision-making skills. For example, the IEL report says board members "should learn how to function in a corporate body and understand how decisions are made in a group policy making context."

Consultant Vic Cottrell said board training tends to concentrate on "functionary things" like how to develop policy or a budget, rather than on "human dynamics." The NSBA report says boards need to learn process skills, such as communication, how to function in meetings, and ways to work with other people effectively.

Professor Marilyn Tallerico of Syracuse University looked at the training of school boards and found that most members she studied would like to be put "at the center of his/her own learning." This move would entail different methods such as "independent study, opportunities for reflection on experience, and reciprocal teaching-learning" with superintendents. This approach reflects a trend toward learner-directed education in teacher training as well as in classroom instruction of students.

Dealing with conflict

Improved training of board members, of course, is designed to reduce conflict within boards and with superintendents by making sure that new members understand and fulfill their roles. But sometimes training doesn't prevent individual members from causing strains in their relationships with others, as, for example, with single-interest members.

Boards and superintendents themselves can reach accord with such members in a number of ways without seeking outside help. These methods take initiative, but they always work better than reacting passively to the conduct of problem members, according to board members, superintendents and consultants.

Some problem board members, Heller said, "are really not interested in sitting down in workshops or in being a team member. Their bizarre behavior may get rewarded by receiving attention in the papers or playing to applause at meetings," he said. "Some individuals are very effective at dividing and conquering the board."

Superintendents frequently give themselves only two options: they either fight or ignore a new member who comes on the board with "an agenda," Heller said. A third option should be a search for accommodation, he said.

He advises boards and superintendents "to try to bring them into the fold by giving them strokes and by listening to them. Don't play into their hands" by fighting with them. "Try to work with them," Heller said. "The thing the superintendent needs to do is to understand that when new members get elected, they must be seen as members of the family. Too often, they are regarded as adversaries."

The first step should be making contact and welcoming them to the board, regardless of whether their campaign planks or statements seemed uncooperative or even hostile, he said. The superintendent then should arrange with the rest of the board for all of them to sit down and review policies on board and CEO roles along with goals, plans, and programs of the district.

Offer to help

After initial contact with new board members, their particular interests and concerns should be discussed and efforts made to help them achieve their objectives, if they are serious and legitimate. Several sessions of this kind could be held to make sure that all related matters are covered thoroughly.

In this fashion, Heller said, the board and superintendent "can show that the organization is much larger and more complex than the new members might have realized." This approach can usually "develop credibility and support" from the newcomers, he said.

But "superintendents need to be more aggressive" in leading these efforts, Heller said, and many do not. Consultant Ira Krinsky said that where he has observed disruptions caused by new members, "the superintendent had checked out emotionally."

Orientation can help, but . . .

James Buchanan, superintendent of the Tempe Union High School District in Arizona, said his board's new members attend an orientation that covers about 20 items dealing with all aspects of the district. "The first is the board-superintendent relationship," he said. "Why it is the way it is and how we deal with it." He said he and his staff go over these items very carefully and in detail to make sure new members are informed. "If you leave it to chance, you may not like the outcome," he said.

After this kind of orientation, Heller said, "it is important for the board to realize that the superintendent is not responsible for policing the bad behavior of members." This should be made clear in job descriptions for both the board and superintendent. "You have to educate people for what being a board member means," he said. "You have to set ground rules or else you open the way for conflict. When there are no ground rules, it is no surprise that some board members wander all over the map."

Buchanan said the superintendent has to be "strong and diplomatic enough to bring inappropriate behavior to the attention of the member and the full board," but the board ultimately has to resolve it.

Dealing with problems

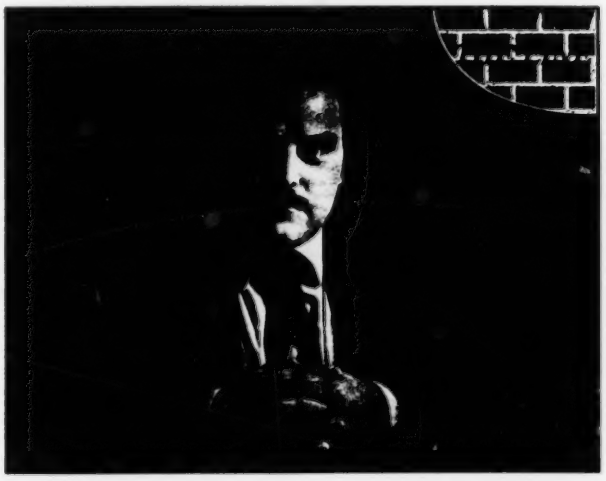
If a personal adversarial relationship has developed between the superintendent and a board member, the superintendent should certainly not let it fester, but should meet with the member and "lay it on the line," consultant William Mahoney said. When he was a superintendent, he added, one member tried constantly to put him in a bad light, "but I told him that some time you are going to want my support, and if you destroy my credibility in the community, I won't be there to help. He turned out to be a great board member."

Heller said the common expectation is that when new members are elected they should conform to the behavior of the sitting board. "But maybe the board should change its behavior," he said. That is why the board should give careful consideration to the issues raised by new members and not reject them out of hand, Heller said.

Karol said superintendents often can overcome potential problems posed by new members simply by "listening to their points of view and respecting them."

Superintendent Robert Spillane of the Fairfax County, Virginia, Public Schools, said it helps to get new members off petty issues and focused on major educational issues. He acknowledged that it is difficult and sometimes board members don't want to restrict themselves to issues related to their roles, "but you just have to work at it."

Spillane uses an annual retreat to set long-range goals



and structures his evaluation so that goals are reviewed both by him and the board. He works with the president of the board to unify his or her colleagues behind what they consider productive behaviors.

A big part of this process involves systematic planning, which can provide boards with "a sense of accomplishment," Charles Fowler, superintendent of the Sarasota County Public Schools in Florida, said. "Board members frequently become frustrated with the day-to-day problems in running a school system," he said. "It is hard to step back and see what is being accomplished. The planning process is excellent to focus on attempts to improve."

Without it, "people bring up ad hoc or personalized issues and expect them to be dealt with on an ad hoc basis," he said. "If you don't have a sense of where you're going, you're going to be constantly dealing with things from left field, and if you're not dealing with them successfully, the superintendent may be seen as the stumbling block."

Back to the baby boomers

Writing about sometimes over-eager baby boomer board members—the younger generation of elected officials—Kara and Richard Funk advised superintendents to look for ways to enable them to have a positive effect on the district. They also need to be "consulted, recognized, and appreciated" more than the average board members of the past, they said.

In their *Executive Educator* article, the Funks suggested that boards and superintendents:

- Bring baby boomers into major issues and provide them with increased information, especially on subjects they are interested in.
- Treat them as individuals and respect their values.
- In preparing meeting agendas, provide ample background material to explain items and, if appropriate, present options on actions. And seek to avoid matters that would appear to waste time.
- Develop a sound policy-development process, including the use of measurable outcomes for policies and clear-cut plans to review progress toward goals.
- Allow for the airing of diverse views on the board to help members understand their differences and to improve the likelihood of reaching consensus on issues.

Code of ethics

One way to gain cohesion around productive behaviors is to draw up and adopt a "code of ethics" for the board and superintendent, said William Soult, a board member in the St. Vrain School District in Longmont, Colorado. This set of principles constitutes a pledge to engage in what the board and CEO agree is positive conduct and to avoid undesirable behavior.

Then, both the board and superintendent should frequently review it and encourage each other to abide by its precepts, Soult said. A number of superintendents, including Lewis W. Finch of the Jefferson County Public Schools in Colorado and Eugene R. Hertzke of the Central Kitsap School District in Silverdale, Washington, said the principles their boards adopted have been very effective in promoting mutually supportive styles.

Improving the superintendent's skills

Superintendents today face ever-increasing demands from local communities and school boards. They need the skills and strategies to channel the energies of those groups into cooperative efforts that produce better schools.

Many superintendents surveyed for this report stated emphatically that their preservice training for the position fell short of equipping them with the well-rounded educational background they need. This finding along with other evidence indicates that superintendents sometimes are unable to cope successfully with board challenges because they lack adequate preparation in communication, interpersonal, and political skills, and other areas that breed strong board and community relations.

Just as board members find inservice training effective

They also need to be consulted, recognized, and appreciated more than the average board members of the past.

in helping them understand and carry out their responsibilities, successful superintendents also say that active participation in professional development activities has helped them immensely. The inservice workshops and seminars offered by AASA, state associations, and others have made a world of difference in overcoming preservice limitations, they said in the survey for this report.

Inservice participation

About 95 percent of the surveyed superintendents said they were afforded opportunities by their districts for inservice training, and 96 percent of those said they participated and found it helpful. School board presidents who were surveyed answered almost identically.

Edward L. Bleeker, superintendent of the Ruthven/Ayrshire Community School District in Iowa, said his administrative preparation in college "was not nearly as helpful as inservice training while on the job." Many inservice seminars have been effective in developing good board relationships because of "an opportunity for sharing and interaction with other superintendents and board members," said Superintendent Thomas A. Brown of the South Colonie Central Schools in Albany, New York.

One superintendent who asked not to be identified said inservice training "has been my salvation" by allowing him "to grow and acquire greater levels of . . . skills." William F. Tracy, superintendent of the Branch Intermediate School District in Coldwater, Michigan, concurred: "Without considerable help from peers and practitioners at conferences and inservices—many by AASA—[I am] not sure that I could have survived 30 years as a superintendent."

Improvement in skills

Only 35 percent of the board presidents surveyed answered yes when asked if their superintendents need skill improvement. But, like the CEOs themselves, their comments showed that a significant number think their chief administrators could still do better in interpersonal relations. So while both superintendents and board presidents believe inservice training has been invaluable, they suggest that the acquisition of improved skills represents an important and continuing need.

Numerous superintendents, board members, and consultants interviewed for this report said the possession of essential skills, knowledge, and attitudes by CEOs leads to healthy board-superintendent relations. Studies show that a major factor in the hiring of superintendents still is "personal characteristics"—how well they come across in interviews, their record of communication in the previous position, and whether they relate well to people.

Successful superintendents are acutely aware of the singular importance of these skills, but others are not. For example, some superintendents need to appreciate the value of listening more attentively and respectfully to others, and share credit for accomplishments with board members, many consultants emphasize. Of course, many board members also need to develop and improve the same skills.

What is required

To improve superintendent performance, a consensus of the superintendents, board members and consultants interviewed for this report recommends:

- Increased availability of inservice training opportunities through efforts of the state and national administrator associations, and other related organizations.
- A renewed emphasis on interpersonal, communication, and political skill development, including more attention to conflict management and resolution.
- More aggressive action by professional associations in communicating the need for inservice training and in encouraging participation by superintendents and prospective top administrators, as well as enlisting the support of boards for the time and expense involved.
- Recognition by more superintendents of the critical importance of full and true shared decision making in school governance and initiatives, which brings about wider implementation in school districts. Inservice training should focus more on practical ways superintendents and boards can undertake efforts to make shared decision making work smoothly.
- More opportunities should be provided, where possible, for board members and superintendents to attend inservice sessions together. A growing number of practitioners believe joint training is more effective than separate attendance.

While both superintendents and board presidents believe inservice training has been invaluable, they suggest that the acquisition of improved skills represents an important and continuing need.

Keeping school boards focused

Much has been said and written about what school boards should not do—waste time on trivia and meddle in administration—but recently this emphasis has shifted to what the focus should be: policy making. And clearly the consensus of the subjects of this report's investigations is that productive and respected boards engage systematically in policy development.

How do these boards shun meaningless details and concentrate on the fundamental issues and long-range thinking that determine the fate of school improvement efforts?

The key is learning and adhering to a process—an operational plan that guides all board actions, the IEL report, "School Boards: Strengthening Grass-Roots Leadership," said. The elements of an operational plan include goal-setting, determining priorities, planning and executing, scheduling reviews and oversight, communicating internally and externally, and conducting regular, well-designed evaluations of operations. Boards and superintendents say this process pays off by keeping members focused as a unit on policy issues and by producing results in system and student performance.

Policies reviewed monthly

Joan Kowal, superintendent of the Volusia County Public Schools in DeLand, Florida, said she and her board review district policies monthly to underscore their importance and to make sure they reflect the direction the school system and administrative actions are following.

The need for board-developed policies encompasses a long list of subjects and issues, ranging from long-term plans for school construction and curriculum improvement to rules and procedures governing publication of student newspapers and the naming of schools.

As the IEL report stressed, this policy-making process does not require more board time. It might even require less. But the process does necessitate dropping other activities and substituting time for policy formulation.

Beginning the process

For boards that have not embraced a process for policy development, IEL says they should begin by:

- Analyzing their use of time as boards, separating managerial from policy functions.
- Conducting community surveys to identify the issues, and therefore the policies, that citizens feel need attention and also to find ways to improve communication with communities.
- Set aside time at regular board meetings or at special work sessions to learn about and discuss in depth specific issues, concerns, or programs of the district.
- Schedule special meetings at least quarterly to discuss and formulate policies with the participation of the public.

Policy on policies

In essence, Professor Luvern L. Cunningham of Ohio State University said, boards should develop a policy on policy development that would require:

- Educational policy become the primary and continuing focus of school boards and superintendents as distinct, for example, from personnel, business, and capital improvements.
- Boards meet quarterly for two or three days and have enough time to conduct the policy development process thoroughly.
- Policy-making agendas be developed far in advance, even years in the future, to frame the long-term work of the board and staff.
- Boards, superintendents, and administrative staff members participate in policy development training to assure that the process is carried out well.
- Provisions for genuine and sustained involvement of students, parents, citizens, and staff be included in the process plan.

The superintendents' policy role

If school boards are to play a more vigorous role in policy development, they cannot and do not succeed alone. Superintendents also have a role to play in assisting, even guiding, boards toward that goal, according to the consensus view.

A survey of board members by NSBA showed that their lack of knowledge about policy making and the failure of superintendents to help them learn were two of the main reasons boards do not make policy more often. So the CEO's role is critical.

There is a fine line between a superintendent "making" policy and helping the board shape policy. As previous chapters made clear, superintendents usually have played a central role in policy making. Successful board-super-

Their study of the superintendency has led them to conclude that the superintendent is evolving into a "consultative leader" rather than the "take-charge boss" of the past.

intendent teams say a balance is achieved through a mutual recognition of the board's primacy in policy making and an active support role by the CEO.

Servicing board needs

The IEL report said in districts with strong collaborative leadership, "superintendents reported spending considerable time serving the policy making needs of the board." In one case, it amounted to 85 percent of the CEO's time.

In carrying out this function, the report said, superintendents described their roles as:

- Helping the board develop a policy calendar.
- Delegating specific staff help to the board for policies under consideration.
- Offering consultation on matters where the superintendent has particular expertise.
- Expediting policy deliberations.
- Assisting the board with the final policy statements.

Once policies are adopted, superintendents, of course, are responsible for implementing them, the report said. Boards are responsible for policy oversight, but the superintendents and their staffs provide the data for evaluation.

The heart of leadership

This process places policy making at the heart of school leadership and shapes the way that boards and superintendents share in decision making. For some CEOs, the role is different from the one that typically has been attributed to the superintendency, said Professors Robert Crowson and Van Cleve Morris of the University of Illinois at Chicago. Their study of the superintendency has led them to conclude that the superintendent is evolving into a "consultative leader" rather than the "take-charge boss" of the past.

The talents of such a leader, Crowson and Morris said, have more to do with "working with others toward a shared vision, nurturing the development of leadership at lower levels, facilitating, finding common ground, listening, and persuading."

These talents involve what several superintendents characterized as "empowering others," including the board. Superintendent Art Gosling of the Arlington County, Virginia, Public Schools, said a good policy-making process requires systematic planning, and "the superintendent cannot do it all himself. He has to figure out how to empower other people to contribute."

Boards are activists

Kowal said the superintendent's changing role revolves around the fact that a growing number of boards today want to be extremely active in school decision making. "Given that, you are talking about a different kind of superintendent," she said. "It means a commitment to developing a different kind of board member." The superintendent today needs to "believe in a development process that brings out the best in people and to expect success in all the people you work with," Kowal said.

This development process takes "care and concern" by the superintendent to allow board members to "personalize the relationship," she said. In her district, she said, "we look hard at how to build consensus, and I try to make them feel energized as a board through their role. It's a different style." She calls her style "interactive leadership" and said it goes beyond shared decision making.

Kowal borrowed the term from Professor Judy B. Rosener of the University of California at Irvine, who described interactive leadership in the *Harvard Business Review* as an effort to "encourage participation, share power and information, enhance other people's self-worth, and get others excited about their work."

In this context, Kowal said superintendents have a fundamental responsibility to take the initiative and help boards develop their capabilities for strong collaborative leadership.

Joint responsibilities

In day-to-day operations, the most important area that requires collaborative leadership is the raison d'etre: student performance. Improving schools was discussed briefly in Chapter 8 as a vision or mission that serves as the

Site-Based Management:

Redefining Board-Superintendent Roles

Site-based management, the idea that many key decisions should be made at the school level, is gaining favor across the nation. Along with it comes a need to redefine the leadership roles of school boards and superintendents.

A growing number of states are mandating some kind of decentralized decision-making system by school districts, and in a 1992 survey by the *American School Board Journal*, 68 percent of the board members polled said their districts are involved in some form of site-based management. In addition, thousands of parent and community committees and local school councils have been created to help guide decision making at local schools.

The premise behind site-based management is that "more effective schooling cannot be mandated or legislated" exclusively by the state or the district central office, said Professor William L. Boyd of Pennsylvania State University. In *Issues in Brief*, a publication of the National Association of State Boards of Education, Boyd explained, "Instead, a school improvement process that involves both bottom-up and top-down forces must be brought into play."

Many important decisions need to be made at the local schools, Boyd said, because "this is where the people closest to the students are, and their distinctive needs can decide what needs to be done and how general goals and policies set at higher levels can be best implemented."

Public school governance by boards and superintendents is crucial to school improvement, he said, but it must serve its purpose "in a revised form" to accommodate the sharing of authority with local schools.

There is no pat formula for implementing site-based management. The specific method is best decided by the boards, superintendents, principals, teachers, parents, and students of each district, most authorities agree.

Start with strategic plan

Boyd said a key role for local boards and superintendents—as well as state boards—is to begin with the "collaborative development of a strategic plan for educational improvement and a broad, overall scheme for encouraging, supporting, and assessing the implementation goal of the plan." This provides a framework formulated and adopted by the superintendent and board as a guide and impetus for site-based management.

The plan is important, he said, because "research shows that schools seldom become and remain effective and innovative on their own."

An international study on quality schooling by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, cited by Boyd, said the reality is that "however great the autonomy enjoyed by schools, they are still answerable to administrative authorities at local, regional, and national levels." This means, it added, that local boards and superintendents have responsibility for:

- Setting quality targets and providing the means of attaining them.
- Monitoring the implementation of appropriate strategies.
- Conducting regular appraisals of performance in association with the schools concerned.

Boyd stressed that boards and superintendents "must remember the

substance of communication between effective boards and superintendents. But what kind of improvement is needed, and how can joint leadership help achieve it?

Consultant Ira Krinsky and others pointed out that successful board-CEO teams concentrate their efforts on the "end product," the accomplishment of the students, not just on the process of developing harmonious relationships. Too often, efforts to build relationships can be shortsighted, and, hence the mounting calls for more vigorous leadership in policy development toward delivering better schools, they said.

Professor Larry Cuban of Stanford University said success is attained through true leadership as opposed to management. He defines leadership as "influencing others' actions in achieving desirable ends" by shaping their goals and motivations. But some districts get sidetracked into a preoccupation with "maintaining . . . current organizational arrangements" because of the obstacles to change

modern management adage that 'to manage is not to control, but rather to get results.'" It is easy to "become unnecessarily too prescriptive and intrusive" when pursuing a strategic plan, he added.

The truth, however, is that successful site-based management requires a delicate balance of central and local decision making—in the private as well as the public sector, Boyd said. But, he continued, it is far easier to describe site-based management than to implement it. "It is by no means a quick fix," he said, but it has to be "approached as a developmental process requiring fundamental changes in roles and relationships that can be achieved only over a period of years."

Perhaps the most significant aspect of successful site-based management is the identification of the responsibilities to be assumed by the central office and the school. This was outlined in the same NASBE publication by Carl Marburger and Barbara Hansen of the National Committee for Citizens in Education, as follows:

Successful site-based management requires a delicate balance of central and local decision making

Boards and superintendents may be responsible for:

- Establishing attendance zones and otherwise determining the composition of the student body.
- Defining the criteria for student success or failure with promotion standards, attendance requirements, and local graduation requirements.
- Setting the tone for the district and shaping the expectations and work norms of the staff.
- Enforcing collective bargaining agreements and contracts.
- Establishing the length of the school day.
- Providing research data to the schools.
- Raising and allocating revenue.
- Planning for enrollment.
- Reporting to state and federal authorities.
- Providing districtwide programs, including special education.
- Providing the political support needed for schools to make their own decisions.
- Monitoring quality control to ensure that schools are meeting district goals.

Local schools may be responsible for:

- Establishing goals based on schoolwide assessment of needs.
- Developing or choosing curricula.
- Determining instructional methods.
- Providing training for parents.
- Working in concert with other district schools to align curricula.
- Allocating school funds based on goals and needs.
- Determining numbers of staff and positions needed.
- Hiring staff.

Suggested steps for developing a site-based management system and other implementation information are provided in *School-Based Management: A Strategy for Better Learning*, a joint publication of AASA, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

and incentives to maintain the status quo that are buried within the system, Cuban said.

The element of risk

Several commented for this report that boards and superintendents can make all the right moves toward developing comfortable relationships, but it won't work in the long run without a concerted effort to achieve the kind of leadership that Cuban and others describe. And to make this effort will require risk.

After interviewing a number of superintendents, Professors Crowson and Morris said some superintendents are more predisposed toward "risk management" instead of risk taking. "Organizational rewards" often fail to encourage risk-taking, they said. But productive superintendents and boards say making risk a top priority is essential to breaking out of the mold and reaching new heights of student performance.

"New, creative ways to approach problems will not permeate a working environment unless leaders are willing to take risks, try things for which no precedent exists, bend, and stand up to criticism," said Schuerman. Karol added that "too often the only thing separating good leaders from great leaders is the courage to take risks."

Karol said "school superintendents must develop in their school systems the capacity to change, even when it means taking risks by moving away from established norms toward more creative teaching processes." This means they will have to "set aside their paradigm for teaching and learning, embrace emerging technologies, and try new methods of instruction," he said. This philosophy has paid off for Karol's Calvert County school system, where student test scores have climbed from next to last to third among school systems in the state over the past 15 years.

But risk taking is not the superintendent's charge alone. School boards have the obligation to create the conditions under which more risk is taken. "The quality of schools is enhanced by outstanding board members," Spillane said. "More boards should be asked, 'What have you done to improve the quality of your schools, not how have you pleased the community?'"

Spillane pointed out that "boards set the tone for the school system and determine whether it is going to be a strong academic system or just the largest employer in town."

The value of retreats

Successful boards and superintendents engage in abundant communication, policy development, planning, and risk taking, but where do they do all this? At regular board meetings? Probably not. Their agendas are busy enough, and the glare of a public arena can often inhibit free and full discussion of what are bound to be controversial topics.

Special sessions devoted solely to policy discussions can be used to good effect, but many boards and superintendents find the use of retreats to be the best. Retreats provide the most conducive atmosphere to open and frank discussions of ideas, they say.

The point to remember is that boards and superintendents need a vehicle to assure a full exchange of views, and unless the right setting is obtained, the best intentions may not come to fruition.

In the survey for this report, many superintendents cited retreats as one of the main techniques they and their boards have used to maintain good relationships. Robert Y. Dubel, superintendent of the 90,000-student Baltimore County Public Schools in Maryland, credited "frank conversations with all members of the board present [at] board/staff retreats [using] open-ended agendas."

Eugene Tucker, superintendent of the Santa Monica-Malibu Unified School District in California, recommended "annual retreats to facilitate open and honest communication, to air concerns, and to establish mutual goals for more effective working relationships."

"Retreats allow people to get into a setting where they don't have to posture publicly," consultant Charles Young said. "They can let their hair down. And whatever barriers there are between the board and superintendent are lowered. They really help."

What about the press?

Many superintendents and boards resist holding retreats because they fear that the media will be there. Because of open-meeting laws, board retreats in most states must be open to the media. The potential for media attendance at retreats can be a deterrent because of the fear that frank comments will prove embarrassing if they wind up in the newspapers or on the air.

But this fear is highly exaggerated. Usually the media gets bored with the discussions after a while and leaves, or if the retreats are held out of town, the reporters won't bother to attend. "I have been to retreats where there were lots of press people, and we still had a good exchange," Huge said. "It can make it harder [to be frank] and you might have to watch what you say a little more, but they still can be extremely productive."

The use of consultants

Some school districts have trained their own administrators to serve as facilitators or discussion leaders at retreats. But most superintendents and consultants feel the use of outside facilitators allows retreats to achieve their maximum potential.

"It takes the heat off the superintendent," Young said. "Things can get stuck in a discussion and it shouldn't always be the superintendent who has to step in. Someone skilled in group dynamics can help a group come together." Heller said an "outside person has credibility because he has no vested interest in the outcome and can be viewed as objective. He can raise issues that are sensitive and no one objects. But if a board member or the superintendent raises such an issue, they can get angry and it can carry over after the retreat."

A large number of superintendents surveyed for this report concurred. "Outside consultants are quite useful when discord exists," superintendent David T. Willard of the Kildeer School District 96 in Buffalo Grove, Illinois, said. "An objective and talented facilitator can draw out the underlying issues if they exist," said Richard R. Short, superintendent of the Community Unit School District No. 200 in Wheaton, Illinois. "The key administrative persons can participate in the dialogue, which helps focus the issues and improves the relationship."

Robert L. Hickman, superintendent of the Effingham Community School District No. 40 in Illinois, said, "Many times the board will pay attention to an outside expert when they would not pay attention to someone in the district saying the same thing."

NSBA's guide, *Becoming a Better Board Member*, advises that boards should definitely consider hiring consultants if help is required to solve difficult problems or if new ideas are needed.

This Critical Issues Report's survey, however, also showed that relatively few boards and superintendents use consultants to address problems or improve their relationships. Only 15 percent of the board presidents and 17 percent of the superintendents reported the use of outside consultants for these purposes. But of those who have used them, 96 percent of the superintendents said they would recommend them to others.

The cost factor

The cost of career consultants is the reason most often given for not using them. Sometimes districts have a hard time justifying thousands of dollars for consultants—even though the cost may be relatively small as a percentage of the overall budget—when funds are short and boards may be unfamiliar with the value of retreats.

Some consultants and superintendents point out, however, that consultants can be obtained at very low cost. Many state associations provide economical consulting services for retreats, problem solving, and superintendent searches. Huge said colleges and universities have well-trained staff members who can serve as consultants at retreats for little or no cost. Consultant Karl Plath said some corporations also will provide their executives as consultants for free.

The importance of agendas

The board meeting agenda may not come to mind as an influential factor in good board-superintendent relationships, but practitioners say otherwise. In fact, Professor Paul Thurston of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign probably speaks for most superintendents and boards when he says that "agendas are really central to being an effective superintendent."

"It shouldn't cause as many heartaches as it has," said consultant Kenneth Underwood, but the agenda still does.

Agendas, and therefore meetings, are important because they project an image of the board, the superintendent, and the district. Agendas also can get the school district's business done efficiently, effectively, and promptly. On the other hand, agendas can be a source of friction for relationships. Length of meetings is important because saved time can be used for activities, such as policy formation, that are more significant. And well-run meetings can be accurate reflections of the collaboration that should exist between boards and CEOs.

Meetings tell a lot

In short, meeting agendas are an important source of information about a school district to the trained eye. One superintendent told of returning to the community of a district which he had once headed. After perusing the board's agenda in the local newspaper, he concluded the district was probably adrift. The agenda contained a long list of trivial details for the board to consider and nothing of educational substance.

Effective board-superintendent teams devote considerable time and thought to the development of agendas that produce smooth-functioning and productive meetings. "Agendas are so important—they control the flow of

meetings," said Joseph T. Hentges, superintendent of the Woodstock, Illinois, Community Unit School District No. 200.

One of the critical elements is background materials for items on agendas, Mahoney said. "Every item should have a backup sheet explaining it. Why it is on the agenda, whether it is for information or action, and facts to help board members make decisions."

Huge said the board should adopt and publicize a process that governs the operation of the agenda and the conduct of the meeting. A process provides common ground rules and helps assure that everyone understands how the process works. Particular effort should be made to keep meetings as short as possible by putting items into priority order and combining routine matters into a consent calendar to dispose of them quickly.

"If people sit around for several hours before they begin to take up important issues, they are tired and their reactions are likely to be more negative to each other," Huge said. "When meetings go too long, people may want to use them for other than decisions. Bad procedures can bring out unresolved conflict between the board and superintendent."

Creating the agenda

Another important consideration is the creation of the agenda, which should be undertaken jointly by the superintendent and the board's representative, usually the president, according to the consensus view. That's the way most good board-superintendent teams do it, the IEL report said. As previously mentioned, AASA surveys show that in most cases, agendas still are prepared by superintendents, generally in consultation with the board president.

Shared responsibility for preparing meeting agendas can contribute to better communication and to better-informed board members because their involvement in agenda preparation helps determine the information they want and need. "Superintendents need to be extremely sensitive to the fact that meetings are the board's meetings," Superintendent Schuerman said. "They must be careful not to speak for the board and they should avoid monopolizing these meetings."

* * *

These, then, are ways in which successful boards and superintendents exert strong joint leadership in school systems across the nation. They know it can be done because they have done it. But achieving joint leadership takes an earnest recognition that schools require vigorous direction to meet the test they face in the future, and that boards and superintendents must provide that leadership together.

Site-Based Management:

A Happy Tradition in Cherry Creek

Site-based management, which is being touted far and wide these days, is a relatively new way of operational life for most American school systems, but it has a long tradition in the Cherry Creek Schools of Englewood, Colorado.

The 30,000-student district outside Denver has had its 39 schools making their own educational decisions since the 1960s and has pioneered new roles for the school board, the superintendent, central office staff, principals, teachers, and parents under site-based management.

They are different roles—very different from those in most school districts.

The board really spends its time developing policies that guide the district and monitoring the outcomes of those policies—the way the textbooks say boards should. The superintendent, Robert Tschirki, oversees policy implementation in a collaborative sense, not through directive. He spends most of his time managing the process of site-based decision making, talking to principals, teachers, staff members, the community, and thinking about how to make the schools better.

Freed from detail

Freed from involvement in burdensome detail, the board and superintendent actually have more time to *think* about what they are doing long-term and whether it makes sense. It is a luxury that relatively few boards and superintendents enjoy.

"The idea has been that even though we have been doing site-management for over 20 years, we want to rethink how we do it continuously and instill re-examination in every aspect of school management in order to strengthen management," Tschirki said. It is part of a philosophy that makes innovation the common thread that binds the district together.

The Cherry Creek Schools began to change more than 25 years ago when they embraced "individualized instruction," a hot topic in those days, as the way to organize classrooms and for teachers to teach. But the district carried the idea much further, expecting each school to fashion its own approach to individualized instruction. This meant deciding at the site what that approach would be.

Power to select

At first, the only significant authority given to schools was the power to select their own teachers. Over the years, however, schools also have been given the right to select their principals, develop and manage their own budgets and involve parents in all decisions.

Schools in Cherry Creek are different, and they are expected to be. For example, each school has its own attendance calendar. Out of the 39 schools, 20 different calendars govern when classes are in session and when the school day starts and ends. This diversity of calendars "is probably the ultimate in honoring site-based management," Tschirki said. It is not the most economical way of operating, he said, but principals, teachers, and parents wouldn't have it any other way. (Cuts in state funding, however, may force the district to return to a common calendar to save money, Tschirki noted.)

The schools also are responsible for teacher and student assignments, what is taught within broad district guidelines, the faculty composition, student grading policies, class sizes, additional tasks, and pay for some staff members. They also are responsible for spending lump-sum budgets.

Accountability committees

Each school has what the district calls an "accountability committee," which goes by different site names, that makes these decisions. The committee is composed of parents, teachers, the principal, residents and other staff members. Each is organized and structured differently, depending on local preference.

"Of course, they are not free to do anything," Tschirki said. "Consultation is required between building and central office staff. The schools might be advised how to do it but there is little chance they would be denied."

The context of these decisions is

the key. Teachers, principals, parent representatives and central office administrators are in close contact all the time. Innovation is encouraged. Shared decision making across the district is the goal.

School committees adopt their own goals and annual improvement plans within the framework of district goals. Each committee also uses its own assessment measures along with state accountability requirements.

School goals, plans, and progress reports are reviewed by a district accountability committee of about 65 persons elected by the school committees. If the district committee finds that progress is inadequate, it lets the schools know. Ultimately, the committee reports through the superintendent to the board annually on how schools are doing.

One important benefit is that schools can design programs for their particular students. The Cherry Creek Schools are mostly upper-middle class suburban but student diversity is growing. One school with 31 percent minority, mostly Hispanic, enrollment was able to assign one staff member to help at-risk students with their reading and writing skills. And the school also has provided special summer classes for these students.

Other benefits are student achievement and community support. Cherry Creek students consistently score near the top in state testing, the annual dropout rate is less than 3 percent, the college-going rate is about 80 percent, and, of the 18 local school property tax measures during the last 20 years, all have been successful, Tschirki said.

The board's role

But where does the school board fit into this unconventional scheme of things? "The board is much less involved in real detailed stuff," Tschirki said. "It may arrive at a policy but each school site implements it. If the policy creates problems, the board expects those to be addressed at the schools, and the community people usually go to the school rather than to the board.

"This allows the board to function the way all textbooks say it should function," he said. "The unique difference is it doesn't get involved in trivialities."

Board President Nancy Spence said this decentralized system is so ingrained in the community that top-down decision making would be out of the question. "I can't imagine how a highly centralized board wouldn't get in the way of decisions on how kids learn and how education should be delivered at the school level," she said.

Site-based management "engages the interests and commitments of parents, teachers, business people—a much more broad-based group than under the traditional way of only having educators involved in important educational decisions," she said. The role of the board is "to provide a sense of direction or a vision and to encourage each school to decide how to get there. It takes the board out of day-to-day management but helps to establish a sense of purpose and lets people be free to take risks in implementing policy."

Cherry Creek board members do not feel uneasy or insecure about delegating such vast authority to schools, she said, mainly because of their long experience with the system and its success. "But you have to have trust in the local people and in the accountability committee," she said. And it also "puts a much greater burden on the superintendent to search out and hire the most capable principals, who must be educational leaders. There's a lot of risk there, and if a principal is not effective, it puts our district at risk."

The board meets only once a month for business. But it also has one study session a month where in-depth discussions are held, usually on one subject.

"It serves as a forum for the board, the central staff, and the public," Tschirki said. "I like to bring in an idea and expose the board to it for the first time. It is in the preliminary stage of development, and we ask the board for their thoughts. It is a 'thermometer' meeting."

This monthly meeting immerses the board in policy development from the ground floor and emphasizes its central role in that process.

The superintendent's role

Tschirki said his role as superintendent is "clearly less directive" than in conventional school organizations. "I've always been very collaborative, but this goes much further because so much is decided at the sites," he said. Tschirki said he is "not involved in day-to-day detail" but devotes much of his time to problem solving with staff, principals, and teachers and mulling over ideas for improvement.

"I meet monthly with principals to exchange perceptions," he explained. "I visit buildings regularly and meet with teachers and union representatives. I also meet with the staff after board meetings and we have small group discussions to break down the issues that were brought up. It helps to keep me on the cutting edge."

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